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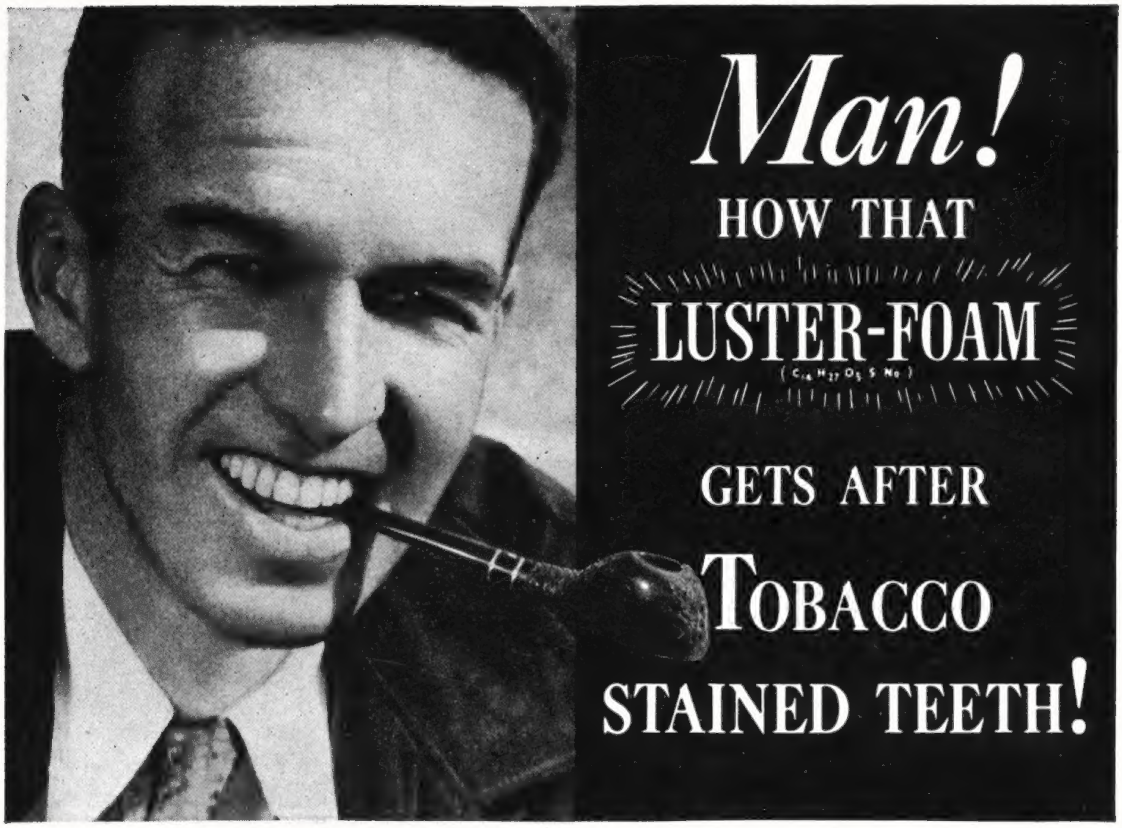
by ROLLIN BROWN

TRAIL'S END

by 'GENE CUNNINGHAM

THE JUDAS BULLET

by JOHN STARR



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Lariat
STORY MAGAZINE

F. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager

MALCOLM REISS, Editor

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A Stirring Cowboy Novelet

GANGWAY FOR A GUN-HAWK!

By ROLLIN BROWN

"Open season on Lee Morgan. . . ." The whisper grape-vined Rebellion River range. Law and lawless, they wanted that Justice Rider—and they wanted him *dead!*

THE trail dropped from rock-ridged summits along the Buckhorns, traversing stony top ravines that fell toward the forks of Rebellion River. From here the stage road into Alderman lay east ten miles, following the easier wagon grade across. It was a land of rock and pine and roughs, full of unsuspected coulees and

pocket meadows that would shelter and hold a hundred head of stock with no more than a few tall lodgepole pines felled across an opening, or half a spool of wire strung through the brush. San Miguel County joined Rebellion River's boundary along the Buckhorn's upthrust, with the triangular head of Sidwell County pushed in from the other hand like the splitting edge of some gigantic wedge. It was natural hideout country—often worse.

Lee Morgan followed this trail. Sundown was past. From an open park-like bench he crossed, Morgan could look out across the sweep of the Rebellion River forks in the dusk. A sparkle of water showed like a tiny coil of silver along some bend of the nearer branch. The farther lay off thirty miles, where now there was only purple bottom haze fading indistinguishably into the creeping dark of night. A pencil line of fog-gray smoke lay over Alderman town in the middle distance, between the forks. With no more pause, Morgan rode on.

The trail struck down into rocky, deeper canyon going. He felt a quickening of pace in the buckskin under him; then a horse neighed out ahead. In a moment Morgan's nostrils caught the pungent odor of some shielded woodsmoke fire. It was full night here. On his left he heard a sudden clink of hobble chains. A horse blew a short, quivering snort, and another of the band circled at a trot, free-legged. The flicker of fire showed under a broken sandstone rim. He smelled a breath of strong tobacco smoke. Some sixth sense, developed from other occasions, told Morgan he had no chance to turn and ride away as he had come, had be wished to do so now.

No rider stood about that fire, although four saddles lay in the dimly outlined circle of its glow. A coffee pot, set aside in the ash, steamed from its flat spout, and a pan of salt sidemeat sizzled there. Morgan rode in against the blaze, dismounting deliberately in its light. This was the kind of chance he had to take. It was part of the job. He saw the red point of a lighted cigarette glowing in the nearby brush.

A man standing there said in a slow, throaty voice, "Where you from, rider?"

Lee Morgan studied the spark of cigarette, shrugged solid shoulders. "Let's say San Miguel," he said. "Or if that ain't sufficient, add way-points south. Does seem I plumb forgot my engraved callin' cards, mister. You'll have to do without."

He stood six-two in his boots, muscled in proportion, grimy, dusty now from all the miles a-saddle since that dawn. There was a solid weight and bulk to him, and the up-flare of the firelight brought out the full line of mouth and jaw, the bold high cheekbones of a face burned by sun and weathered dark as saddle leather. In contrast his eyes would have matched the pale, high blue of sky at noontime. There was something steady as rock in him.

Two men crossed in from the opposite side of the fire. With a single stabbing glance, one bent immediately over the sizzling skillet—a knotty, small, expressionless man—and began turning the salt meat with the blade tip of a knife. The other lacked two inches of Morgan's height, and the build of him was leaner, angular, with a bony sharpness in all his joints. Several days growth of unshaven stubble lined his jaw and cheeks. His eyes were prominent, opaque and black.

"Where you headin' for?"

Morgan said, "Alderman town, maybe. Or once down on the Rebellion Forks, it might happen Jake Taggart's Cross Bar outfit will serve for a roost."

The man's dark eyes were probing, sharp. "You know Jake Taggart?"

"I've heard Jake Taggart could most generally use an extra riding hand on Cross Bar," Morgan said. "Let's put it that way. Or maybe you'd like to have me write this down in a book, so you'll have a copy at hand to refresh your memory later any time. There's certain range where to pry too much means trouble with a gun."

"There ain't so many strangers follow-in' this back trail you've took!"

THE man with the cigarette came in from the brush, a stoop-shouldered, heavy figure, with an old scar wound across one cheek. For three years past, since he was twenty-two, Lee Morgan had lived like this. Of late the work had grown all the more hazardous for him. Odds were building up. Morgan never knew when he was going to face some man in a crowd who would instantly recognize him, or when he would ride into set ambush. By

this same token the term of his usefulness to the Stockmen's Association was finally approaching its end, as old Clip Starrett, head man of the Association, also knew. . . .

At one of those way-point stops south of San Miguel, five days back, old Clip had said, "Son, it's a festerin' trouble hole in there—all that upper fork country of the Rebellion. Say, f'instance, the sheriff of San Miguel County does get himself a good live trail to follow. Maybe it's been a killin', maybe fifty or a hundred head of rustled stock, leavin' a trail a blind man couldn't miss. All right, what happens? Somewhere up in the Buckhorns this sheriff comes to the end of his own county line. He gets word over into opposite country; another sheriff rides up to help —well, that's maybe. Anyhow about this time the quarry's moved on over into Sidwell County, or maybe back into San Miguel. For months past the X Bar C and other San Miguel outfits have been losin' a steady drift of stock through there. You know the situation as well as I do, Lee.

"We never had a chance to get on the inside before," Clip Starrett had continued. "Maybe this is a blind, maybe nothin' in it. What Jake Taggart actually had in mind when he come to the Association six weeks back for help nobody but Jake Taggart knows. Ten-twelve years ago Taggart was buildin' Cross Bar and extendin' his range across the Rebellion Forks by force of might and guns. He never was a squeamish man about where he got his help, or how he accomplished his ends. Jake Taggart might be playin' both ends against the middle now—we don't know. Both Tex Bayle and Splain have backed Taggart's moves in the past. We know Bayle's in the stealin' end up to his neck. But it ain't a time when we can look too close before the next step is took, Lee.

"Charlie Beckman has been in there three weeks, goin' on a month's time now," Clip Starrett had said. "No report from him since the day he left San Miguel. How deep local law enforcement may be mixed up in the crookedness, we don't know. We don't know nothin'. You're carryin' a special State badge yourself. Whatever happens, we got to back up Beckman!"

Three men now stood in the flickering glow of this trail-side fire under the canyon rim. Four saddles lay on the ground, pulled from mounts. Some one of them was staying out in the brush, which might mean anything. The stooped, scarred man threw the butt of his cigarette into the fire. Morgan could not identify him. But the angular, black-eyed man was Splain. Luke Splain was wanted north on an old murder warrant connected with a stage stick-up job; half a dozen localities could have pinned cow and horse theft charges on him. The third man glanced up again, where he bent beside the fire handling the skillet.

For that quick instant his eyes lingered on Lee Morgan's with a hard thrust, trying to convey words that he could not speak. This small, knotty, expressionless man was Charlie Beckman, Association detective. It was a game of wits, ability, quick judgment and an ever-present deadly danger. Success always lay balanced between caution and recklessness, and the plain, cold nerve in a man. How in less than a month's time Beckman had made himself one of this crew, Morgan did not know. But such explained that lack of any report from him, which was worrying old Clip Starrett at headquarters.

Beckman said, without any trace of friendliness, "Tie up yore hoss, rider, if you're eatin' from this pan."

The words meant nothing. Any range camp across the open country from Mexico to the Canadian line, outlaw or ranch crew, would have offered a chance rider grub. But what was in Charlie Beckman's eyes was trying to say more. Morgan turned the buckskin by the reins. Splain was standing back, still studying him with a dark, probing scrutiny that missed no detail. Morgan led the buckskin across to the brush and tied the animal, without loosing cinch. Another horse had been left tied there, unsaddled.

DELIBERATELY as he had ridden into the camp, Morgan took a match from pocket, struck it, and by the light rummaged a hand into saddle-pocket, fishing out a fresh sack of tobacco. The same flare of match showed Morgan the brand on that other horse, and the mark was Taggart's Cross Bar iron. He dropped the

match and went back to the fire rolling a smoke.

Something had changed in those sixty seconds. There was a sudden urgency in Charlie Beckman's eyes, but only the warning look was plain. Beckman was standing now, the hot pan of salt meat set off the blaze. The stooped, scarred man was taut beside him.

"A right long day's ride from San Miguel in here," Morgan said noncommittally. He folded in tobacco and licked cigarette paper, looking across at Splain. "How far would you call it now?"

Luke Splain had shifted his position around the fire, moving across at Morgan's left. Splain's hands were thin and long, each finger spread slightly with thumbs hooked out. He said, "That might depend on the way you rode it! Straight, it's sixty mile. But I reckon it would have took you two days an' be nearer ninety, crossin' over into the Red Bluff hills!"

Morgan's solid lips drew thin. "So what?" he asked. "You ask too many questions for your own health. Did I tell you I'd come straight?"

"No, it ain't that so much," Splain said softly. "But what was you doin' over in them hills? There ain't no other red clay in this country that would stick to your buckskin's hocks the same!" A throaty, rising violence came into his voice. Splain was standing balanced forward on his toes. "Hell!" he said. "We got tipped off two weeks ago that a cow association dick was comin' into this section. No other would have ever bothered to scout around them barren hills! Fella, talk—if you got anything to say! Talk fast! If not—"

The scarred, stooped man was stepping back a pace, gnarled fingers closing on the butt of his gun. Twice within the past year Morgan had faced a situation like this. On each of those occasions he had been openly recognized. This time red clay left on the buckskin's hocks was something he had overlooked. It wasn't a game where a man could make very many such mistakes. There was still a fourth man of them out in the brush. But if possible, Charlie Beckman's identity must be kept concealed. Beckman had been in here almost a month, on the inside.

Across the fire, it was Charlie Beckman who pulled gun first, fast as Morgan knew that wiry, cold-faced little operative to be on the draw. He yelled at Morgan, *"Lift 'em! Hoist 'em high, you!"*

Balanced and suddenly lithe as a cat, Splain reached. The scarred, stooped man was yanking weapon from holster now. In that split second of time Morgan fully comprehended Beckman's play—and both knew immediately that it was too late. Beckman's right foot was within twelve inches of the big coffee pot in the ashes. Beckman did the next best thing. With one motion he fired across Morgan's body into the night and, swinging, kicked over the coffee pot. A sudden cloud of steam and ash mushroomed up from hot embers, through which Splain shot twice. Morgan saw a muzzle streak at Beckman's side, where the stooped, scarred man went into action, and a whisper of wind tugged against one cheek.

Splain was backing off, fanning his third and fourth bullets through the dark. Morgan crouched to knees and let loose once at Splain. He dropped, crawled, changing his position. Echoes piled high in one long, rattling reverberation through the hills. In one corner of Morgan's dark field of vision, the stooped man somehow placed him and again cut lead loose—followed almost instantly by the small spitting tongue of Beckman's second shot. There a body fell. Directly Morgan turned his fire from Splain into the sandstone bluff, lifted high, to give Beckman an out. There was no light at all.

HE crawled on inch by inch around the steaming, wet embers of the fire and in against the base of the bluff. One hand encountered a boot, where the scarred man had gone down. Loose stock was running along the canyon above. No sound came from Splain, backed off to the left somewhere, reloading silently. Then a pebble rattled with a small, tiny sound, very close.

Morgan breathed softly, "Charlie!"

Charlie Beckman waited there, almost within arm's reach. When he spoke his lips had come within six inches of Lee Morgan's ear: "I'm gettin' out now, Morg. No time to talk, but it'll take a clean-up from the bottom to get at the mess in here. Bayle's the head, workin' with Splain. And you'll have to play it in the open now. Best I could do. S'long."

He was crawling off the other way, without sound. Morgan crouched in against the sandstone wall, refilling cylinder of his gun. He could see an ember of the fire regaining a dull glow, fanned by the breeze through this canyon slot. Then he began to move once more. He was afraid to make any kind of a try for his own mount now. The toe of his boot touched one of the saddles pulled off here. Morgan bent, silently tying up stirrups and knotting cinch around hull with the latigo, so nothing would drag. He felt around for bridle, caught the saddle up under one arm. He went on step by step, following the side of broken wall. The drenched smell of the fire was strong. Presently that glowing ember broke into an inch-tall point of flame behind.

He could hear the clink of the hobbled horse's chains moving on up canyon. No other sound. Then strikingly close, Charlie Beckman's voice a-mutter, speaking to some other man.

"You ask me, he's stuck himself in a hole along that rock somewhere," Beckman said. "Be like proddin' out a rattler in the dark to get at him. Or wait until mornin'—if you figure we got time to spare. It's your move, Splain!"

Splain grumbled, "You pulled a fool play there. That's what I don't savvy. You ain't a fool of a man!"

Beckman's voice became tonelessly taut. "I heard a lot about you one time, Splain," he said. "An' what I seen from you tonight don't back it up. Be careful with yore tongue. I don't take too much talk from anybody!"

"All right, all right—shut up!"

The two moved on stealthily, circling back around the camp. Morgan continued very slowly. Moments later he found the hobbled animal in the canyon above. He saddled, bridled, and paused a while listening; then led the animal on a way before mounting. He climbed the canyon to the edge of bench above. An hour later two riders driving eight or ten head of loose horses came up trail, dimly visible under the stars, pushing hard. Counting those four saddles at the camp, it still left one man unaccounted for.

Lee Morgan moved across bench into deeper cover, sleeping fitfully till the chill of dawn awoke him. With daylight he headed out along the near canyon wall, watching every break and finger of bottom brush or timber, while the flood of sunrise rose and flamed across the Rebellion Forks. A mile beyond the piece of broken rim where the fight had occurred, Morgan sloped down to the lower trail, and here, plainly marked in the ground, he found track where one man had left the camp last night, riding this way hard for the river country range.

II

HE forded the near fork of the Rebellion, and put his horse up banks to strike the trail once more where it met a dim road. Other riders had cut in here from the west about daylight, he judged, from the freshness of the sign, swinging on toward the middle country at a gallop. Morgan rode at a steady jog. This was all pine land, thinning into frequent patches of open meadow where the grass tops brushed a horse's knees. Twice he passed scattered bands of cattle, and turned aside long enough to ride among the animals, studying brands.

Taggart's Cross Bar iron outnumbered the other local brands—a Running N, 404 and a Z Slash. He saw a solitary Wigwam steer, cut the animal apart and rode along its flank a moment. He jogged back to the road.

Deep-traveled ruts joined in at a right angle from the east. Within a mile the country rose to a gradual swell, the timber thinned abruptly, the now much traveled road fell from the ridge and crossed the bottom land of an open pine-fringed valley. Corrals and a low shake-roofed barn appeared, set deeper in the valley. A house stood back under pines and big yard cottonwoods, a hewn log structure with whitewashed walls and a long, sloping roof that sheltered a wide gallery.

At the distance, a man left the corrals and moved up toward the house afoot. Two riders, parting from him, swung and came down the road, shielded in a moment by the line of bottom timber that followed the valley's flowing creek. Hoofs clipped hollowly across planks of a wooden bridge. Morgan met the two in the open fifty yards beyond.

The near rider had forged half the length of an animal ahead of his companion. He

was a powerfully built man with a worn, flap-brim hat pulled straight across his square forehead. Strong throat cords stood out in the open crotch of shirt collar. The man's big, squarish head met a neck as broad as his flat face, set on the width of hunched, thick-muscled shoulders. In saddle the frame of him was at once tall and very blocky, but his small, booted feet, rested in the stirrups, hardly reached the level of his animal's belly. All the strength of him and more than half his standing height was in that unusually powerfully muscled upper body.

He did not rein till he came up neck to neck with the horse under Morgan. His flat, squarish face remained tilted slightly, head thrust a little down and forward, so that his small, wide-spaced eyes looked from under full upper lids. He evidently knew the horse under Morgan without bothering to glance at its brand. His voice was heavy from the power in his swelling chest.

He said, "I'm Bayle. Word's already reached me that there's a dead man lyin' under the Buckhorn Canyon bluffs. That man's Hod Weaver. I hired Hod Weaver —he was workin' for me. Friend of mine. Long time ago we both handled cattle over in the Spanish Basin country. Don't get it wrong! Don't get any of this wrong, mister! Nobody's invited you, nobody that I know of has asked you to take a hand in here. And I look after my own!"

Morgan's lips made a flat, solid line across his face. He let a moment drag by without replying. Nothing about Bayle changed in that interval. Then Morgan said deliberately and with great finality, "So what?"

"You look a man," Bayle told him in the same low voice, that rumbling power of his chest deep in it. "I should've knowed it from what happened. Give time, you might open into things that would blow the bottom out from under every outfit on the Rebellion Forks. You don't know what you're mixin' into—you don't know what's piled up an' built behind it all. But I don't reckon that is goin' to happen—no more than I reckon you're goin' to run. And you won't leave here any other way, mister! Put that in your book. I'm givin' you till sundown—and that ain't speakin' for any of my men."

HE put his small booted heels into the horse. Tex Bayle rode on along the Cross Bar road, the pale, bleak-faced youngster with eyes cold as ice and restless working hands beside him. Neither turned to look back, nor did Morgan swing in the saddle. The hooves of the horse he had taken from Splain's outfit in the canyon last night thudded across the bridge. He climbed the valley floor toward the corrals and shake-roofed barn Bayle and the other had left.

The man who had started up toward the old whitewashed house had reached its wide gallery, where he stopped and waited motionless. Spare horses loafed in the big main corral. Without invitation Morgan crossed to the barn and stabled his mount at a hay-filled manger, loosing cinch but not removing saddle.

As he walked toward the house Morgan's eyes lifted once and ran across the lift of middle hill. The folks of Rebellion River lay like a wide letter V across the land, Alderman town near the lower point, the left fork draining all the broken draws, ravines and canyons along the Buckhorns' face. For a moment something like pain crossed Lee Morgan's features while old memory roused and stirred deep in him, then was as suddenly wiped away.

The man waiting on the gallery was lank with high, bony shoulders and a gray, tobacco-stained mustache. Gray shaggy brows beetled over his eyes with a sort of hooded, eagle look. The man was tough and wiry, leathery. He did not speak till Morgan climbed the half dozen squared logs set in for gallery steps. He was rolling a wad of tobacco in one cheek. He spat across to the dirt, and his voice had a brittle rasp in it.

"Who be ye?"

Morgan leaned against a post, studying the man these seconds without curiosity, the corners of his solid lips twisted down a little. He said, "Clip Starrett sent me in here—in case you don't already know. I reckon you do, word seems to have traveled fast. The name is Morgan. And I'd mighty well appreciate some breakfast before we talk."

The old man turned. He called through an open door into the house, "Sally! Rider here, wantin' grub. Cook him up something."

Fifteen years had elapsed since Jake Taggart had brought his first herd of half a thousand cattle through the wide top-slot of the river country V, his two older boys driving on the flank, the wagon with his wife and smaller children following. Taggart had lived to bury his two elder sons here on the Rebellion Forks, both dead of violence which might have been averted. There had been continual conflict through those years, but it had only toughened him, only hardened the stubborn will of this wiry, hawk-featured man, From that first half thousand head of stock Jake Taggart had extended his Cross Bar iron across the Forks, crowding the grass when necessary to gain his ends, massing saddle-strength wherever he could get it, from among the wanted clan, and drifters across the Buckhorns, and alliance with the wild gang Bayle and Luke Splain represented.

His sharp gaze still lingered slantwise on Morgan's tall, big frame. He moved around with a wiry, balanced slowness and spat again across the gallery edge.

"Morgan," he repeated the name speculatively. "Ever been in this country before now, Morgan?"

Leaned against the gallery post, Morgan was twisting a cigarette. Presently he lit it, nodded, his lips still compressed at the corners. "Yes," he said, and added nothing more.

The noise of a pan set on a stove, a small clatter of dishes being laid on a table, came through dimly from the rear of the house. In a moment the sound of a girl's voice, full with a sort of low melody in its tone, carried out to them.

"Coffee's hot and ready now. The rest won't take long."

She was standing at the stove, her face turned away, when Morgan followed Taggart through the house into the kitchen. Morgan washed at a tin basin set on a bench just inside a rear door. The room was big and square with a long center table that would seat ten or a dozen men. He came around and sat down at the place prepared for him.

FOR a moment then, as she turned her head and glanced directly at him, some sudden, startled thing came up into Sally Taggart's eyes. It lay close under their dark surfaces, and throughout the meal she did not speak. Her mother had been dark and tall with the same proud lift to her head. Had been—once—very beautiful, before Jake Taggart, with that wilful, careless dominance in everything he did, had found and married her . . . . and fifteen years ago brought her and his family to this deep, outland frontier, as he also had driven his cattle. Sally had been five then. Her mother lay peacefully at rest now, beside the two older sons, here on the Rebellion.

Morgan finished, rose and said, "I thank you right kindly, ma'm."

Jake Taggart watched from the doorway, and for that instant his sharp, fierce eyes traveled from one to the other. Abruptly, without speaking, Taggart led the way outside again to a small end room that opened off the gallery. It was Cross Bar's office, a bare, hewn-sided room, with odds and ends of saddle gear strung from pegs about the walls. Some hand, waiting here, had cut the mark of a brand in the wall, and others had followed this example. Cross Bar, Running N, the Z Slash and 404, Spur and X Bar C and Wigwam—all the brands of this country, San Miguel and Sidwell Counties were to be found carved somewhere on the flat-surfaced inner logs. Taggart sat down in a sagged, rawhide chair.

"You said Clip Starrett sent you in here. What's he done beside that? I figured it would be little enough," Taggart said in his grating, brittle voice. "That was near two months ago when I sought out Starrett in San Miguel. But now finally he's got around to sendin' an Association man into the country, huh? You, one man alone. An' last night on the upper trail you tried to ride in from nowhere on Luke Splain and two-three others like him at their fire. By all the laws of things, I don't know how you got any farther. But somethin' happened, another man got killed instead—and that man was Hod Weaver! That brings Tex Bayle down from the hills! By noon today there won't be a ridin' hand on the Rebellion, or a rustler or wanted man across the Buckhorns that don't know all about you—!"

There was always a deliberation about Lee Morgan, it showed in everything he did, and he made no answer now. That

silence seemed to rasp on Taggart and irritate him.

"Hell!" he snapped. "You passed Tex Bayle on the road. I seen it from the porch here. Why Bayle let you cross his track an' ride on, I don't know. I can't even guess. But on the Holy Bible I'd swear you won't live to see another sunup on the Rebellion if you don't get out. Take the Alderman road, right now you'd never get back through them hills alive. You don't know what's behind things here. You don't know what kind of an explosion might be set off under this whole country!"

Morgan's head inclined a little. "Bayle mentioned the same thing," he said. "I'm interested."

Taggart stared a while, his hawkish eyes boring into Morgan's. "Lissen!" Taggart said huskily. "Lissen, I never seen you before. You rode in here now an' asked for grub, and Cross Bar makes a habit of feedin' any stray rider that comes this way. That's all. I'm washin' my hands of you and Starrett, and any word that's ever got out to the Stockmen's Association from this country. It can't be proved I ever talked to Clip Starrett. And I'm tellin' you to ride! Pronto! Leave Cross Bar the same way you come. There ain't no more to be said between us!"

MORGAN made no move. He rolled another smoke and inhaled deeply. Then presently he said, "You've cut a wide swath across this country, Taggart. From that first five-six hundred head of cattle you brought in here the years ago, you've spread Cross Bar across the grass of the Rebellion Forks. It never made no difference to you where you hired a man, so long as that man could ride and handle a gun. You've rode rough-shod over your neighbors, cleanin' out what little outfits stood in your way—till today Cross Bar is rangin' two head to one against Z Slash, the Running N or 404, them that have remained. You've had to have saddle-power to do it. With no other choice, you've had to play hand in glove with men like Bayle and Luke Splain."

Jake Taggart had risen, a high flare of color whipping across his cheeks. "Be careful what you say—!"

Morgan paid no heed. "It's meant Bayle had grown too strong along with you," he continued with the same steady deliberation. "So has Splain. Both come in here hunted men, Splain is still wanted bad. But between 'em now, Bayle and Splain might rod a force of twenty-thirty men of their own down from the hills. Nobody knows how much X Bar C Company stock and other has been run across the Buckhorns from over San Miguel way. That's the other end of it. No, you never had no share in the rustlin'. You ain't that kind of a thief, Taggart, but you could close your eyes to it. And finally Bayle had growed big enough on his own to turn and cut into you. Finally Cross Bar has been losin' cattle across the Rebellion range. The Bayle-Splain crew has started minin' its own back dooryard. That's what brought you across to have your talk with Clip Starrett some six weeks or two months ago, Taggart, hopin' for outside help."

Jake Taggart's tight mouth worked. "You're doin' the talkin', and I'm figurin' you won't be alive another sunup nohow. What kind of help is that?"

Morgan studied the man a while. "Bayle lost no time gettin' down here this mornin', throwin' the fear of life and death itself into you, Taggart!" he said. "I reckon that's the answer. Left to itself, Cross Bar couldn't muster a force to hold against Bayle and Splain till fall. You've got no other friend, the way you've pushed Cross Bar across the Rebellion Forks grass these years.

"The other outfits in here, Z Slash, 404 and Running N, will never back you with a gun if Bayle and Splain come down in force. One or another, 404 or Z Slash, might tie up with the Bayle-Splain interests, willin' to climb over Cross Bar the same way you've done to others. War could rip the country wide open and turn it wrongside out. Only the Bayle-Splain crews would grow fat from pickin's on the bones. Well, you've chose to run with the wolves, Taggart, and now their fangs are closin' on your own throat. I don't know what it matters."

Morgan shook his head. His solid lips were flat, pressed hard against his teeth. He got up slowly, moved across the room. "But I reckon that don't change my job," he said.

His shoulders filled the doorway. At the opposite end of the gallery, as he walked

across to the squared log steps, he saw the girl standing. And again there was something close under the dark depths of her eyes, like recognition. Her lips were parted slightly. She was standing back, framed and tall and dark, the print of her calico dress a splash of color against the hewn whitewashed wall of the house. But she did not speak.

Morgan lifted his flat-crowned wide hat. The beauty of this girl was unescapable. He walked on across the yards, that distance back to the corrals and barn, his big-boned fists lumped into knots, a slow, suppressed fury gathered in him. She had no part in a thing like this, and yet she was bound to suffer.

HE had reached the barn and stood a pace within its open door before the image of her cleared his mind, and he realized abruptly that he was not alone here. Backed against the stall where he had left his horse, a lithe, tall youngster faced him with burning eyes.

"You been up to see the Old Man," the youngster said. His lips worked and twisted. "I know what you're up to! You been tryin' to talk him into backin' your play here, no matter what the cost! No matter Cross Bar won't be runnin' a brand here on the Rebellion inside a month, once war opens. A man like you—"

Morgan said, "I take it you're Jake Taggart's son?"

"Lance," the young man told him. He was nerving himself up to something. "Z Slash would team with hill forces in a minute, askin' no more than the chance to ride over Cross Bar— It could happen overnight. Running N and 404 has each been at the other's throat over boundaries, and 404 wouldn't wait for more opportunity."

His voice became shrill and taut. "You can't get away with it! You come in here like this—it won't matter if you're dead or alive, once it's started! You can't—"

Morgan saw it coming. He took two deliberate paces, struck crosswise with a full-swung left from the hip. Lance Taggart had a gun pulled from holster, throwing it around. The blow hit him in the flat of the chest, staggered him sidewise. But he did not lose the gun. Morgan's left encircled his shoulders, his right hand grappling along Taggart's gun arm. He caught the arm between elbow and wrist. He lay it back against the edge of a manger. He threw his weight on the arm.

Taggart's fingers opened with pain. The gun fell, still unexploded, and went down in the litter of hay and trash below. Morgan swung him around. Taggart, breathing through his teeth, struck with the point of a knee. Morgan caught the leg. One hand went to Lance's shoulder, the other hooked around his knee. He lifted, swung and threw Lance Taggart bodily against the stable side wall. He bent over the manger, found the Colt's, extracted the shells and let it fall. Then he turned back.

Young Taggart was sitting up, half braced against the wall. A small trickle of blood ran from one corner of his lips, his white-set features cast in the hawkish mold of old Jake Taggart's with a resemblance so strong there could never have been any mistaking the violent, headstrong blood of the father in this younger son. His eyes burned with a cold, bright malevolence. For a steady moment Morgan looked at him.

Morgan said, "There was one rider of them at Luke Splain's fire last night that I didn't get a look at—and a Cross Bar horse tied up in the brush. That one man turned back this way before mornin', ridin' hard for the river range. If I'd wondered I reckon I'd know who that rider was now, Lance. Keep away from Splain!"

He walked to the horse in the stall, tightened cinch and led the animal out, swinging into saddle with no further word or glance.

III

A DIM abandoned trail that had long ago been a road led through upper valley thicket. It crossed a rising slope thick with young jackpine and spruce and climbed to the open swell of ridge above. Here Lee Morgan paused a while and watched the land, slack in the saddle. A hazy-thin streak of dust had lifted out of timber to the east, following along the swales and easy bottom going, till he saw three riders cut from the Running N turnoff into the main Cross Bar road, far and tiny with distance, continuing their steady

run on across the middle country toward Alderman town. The sun had hardly reached mid-morning height. Morgan built a smoke and lit it, climbing across the ridge.

A space of gently inclined flat lay out before him, and again the timber closed. The silence here was deep, the hoofs of his mount muffled on the thick needle mat. Sunlight filtered through in shafts and stippled pools. He passed through an old timber gate, one post rotted at the ground, still following those hardly discernible ruts of a road. Presently the light ahead brightened along a clearing's edge. Still sheltered, Morgan paused, no readable expression on his face.

A square, two-room cabin with a broken door and a time-sagged roof stood ahead, across the open stretch of fifteen or twenty acres of deep meadow grass. The ends of a pole corral behind had long ago been pulled apart, where stray riders or fugitives, hesitating to approach any tenanted ranch, had dragged such handy fuel across to the house for firewood. What window openings showed across the front of the place yawned vacantly, glass knocked out. Still following the timber edge, every sense quickened by the rush of thoughts this scene brought him, Morgan circled the clearing.

Somewhere to his right, back in deeper cover, suddenly a jay was squawking. In a moment Morgan halted. The jay had moved, quartering across toward the clearing, still yammering its harsh-throated bird alarm. Then silence for a while. Morgan drew his mount in against the trunks of timber, waiting without motion. Hardly twenty paces distant, he heard the small metallic clink of a spur or bridle chain, and a rider shoved into view. The jay flapped up anew, cawing shrilling. Morgan pitched the sound of his voice to just reach the man's ears.

He said, "You here alone, Charlie?"

Charlie Beckman swung his horse and let a gun half-drawn in that flash of second slip back into holster. His knotty figure was powdered over with trail dust that caught in every seam and crease of his clothing. His eyes were red-rimmed from grit and a sleepless night, although the big Spur brand horse under him this morning was comparatively fresh. Beckman swung from saddle.

"Saw a rider leavin' Cross Bar's yards a while ago, and again picked him up across ridge yonder," Charlie Beckman said. "Figured that man would be you, Morg, headin' up here, so I followed. Yeah, alone right now. But let's talk and talk fast. This country's full of riders."

He squatted on his heels, scooping a space of ground before him clean of needle trash. No mention of that shooting at the canyon fire last night, and the part Beckman had played in it. Charlie Beckman had crossed the Buckhorn rim with Splain later, driving the loose horses. Toward midnight he had cut west alone to join a camp of three Bayle riders in the upper country. The four of them had shoved back through the rough top hills and broken ridge land before dawn to what was known as Big Spring Bench, and the Bayle-Splain main camp there. Splain meanwhile had circled east and south, picking up stray men at the little hidden camps among the draws and pocket meadows. Beckman was drawing some of this out on the ground.

"Big Spring Bench up here. Across the left fork of the river. Halfway up the hills." One knotty finger traced out the V of the Rebellion Forks, and drew a line for the Buckhorn rim. "Bayle's got maybe four-five hundred head of stock collected on the Bench. Most of it X Bar C, rustled across the Buckhorns in little bunches of twenty-thirty head. They leave 'em out in the pocket meadows till the brands could be re-burned and healed."

HIS finger made an X, a bar and the C of one of the neighboring outfits. He extended the bar through the X to the C in one continuous line, making the X five-pointed, the C like the heel-piece of a spur.

"There's Bayle's Spur iron, the way it's worked on a hide. Some of it wet-blanket work, but most needled in with a hot wire. Tex Bayle's an artist at it himself. Anyhow it all passes for the Spur iron three to six months later when they make a market drive. There's half a dozen other brands, includin' Wigwam, all worked the same way. Splain's in it with him, just as deep. And between 'em, Bayle and Splain can throw a force of twenty, maybe twenty-five, riders across the Rebellion Forks any time. There was thirteen men collected

at the main Bench camp, daylight this mornin'."

"What's Tex Bayle afraid of?"

"Afraid?" Charlie Beckman lifted hard, raw eyes. The Association had never hired a better man than this knotty, expressionless little range detective, and there was no more dangerous job. "Afraid?" he said again. "No, Bayle ain't afraid. This is what he's asked for, deliberately proddin' Cross Bar into it. But the time ain't right. Bayle would like to stall it off till he gets that bunch of cattle on the Big Spring Bench drove and sold. It amounts to ten-twelve thousand dollars' worth of beef to him and Splain. Then they're ready."

He drew marks on the ground again. "Here's Cross Bar in the middle section, rangin' the width of the Forks—not strong enough to fight Bayle-Splain alone, not strong enough, in fact, to face any kind of range war with Bayle shiftin' weight against Jake Taggart. Here's Running N. Over this way, 404 and Z Slash. Z Slash is only waitin', hopin', prayin', ready to ride its own path of destruction with a hint the Bayle-Splain force will switch over and throw its force of guns behind a Z Slash thrust. Running N and 404 are facin' each other over old, long-standin' trouble. It is bad business, Morg, any way you look at it."

"Where does young Lance Taggart fit in?"

Beckman shook his head. "Lance has been runnin' some with Splain on the side, maybe rustlin' a few head of local hosses when he gets the chance. Jake Taggart don't know about it."

"How about the local sheriff at Alderman?"

"It's a question. There's a tidy sum in wanted-and-reward money awaitin' him at most any little sheltered camp he cared to tackle across the hills. To date, he ain't never tried it. Maybe that just shows his good sense. Elected four-five months back, mainly because nobody else wanted the job. Name of Springer — Matt Springer."

Beckman climbed into saddle. He looked from timber out across the open meadow strip to the old abandoned cabin there, and back once more at Morgan. "Now an' again, passin' here, I've thought of that old story you once told me, Morg," he said. He gestured toward the cabin. "It don't look at all the way a man would like to remember, I guess."

Morgan said nothing. He mounted. Beckman turned the big Spur horse he rode.

"Here's as good a meetin' spot as any later, if the lid blows off. What's the play now, Morg?" He was watching Morgan closely.

Morgan said, "There ain't no choice, I reckon. The whole thing's been buildin' too long. Take care of yourself, Charlie."

He continued around the timber edge, never moving into the open, till he reached a little knoll back of the cabin covered with young spruce. Here Lee Morgan dismounted and stood a while, gazing with sombre eyes into a tiny enclosure made of wire and pickets, where a rude-carved grave board bore the name "Cabel Morgan" and a date now ten years old. Moments passed. And then presently Lee Morgan went back to his mount.

He left this gently sloping meadow flat and its abandoned seclusion, riding the ridges and timbered roll of the country, keeping off the trails, and lining straight for Alderman town at the junction of the Rebellion Forks.

THE town occupied a strip of open river bluff, the single street of its log and sawed-wood buildings extending back a ragged hundred yards. Thrown together here in a scant handful were four saloons, a couple of general stores, saddlery and a blacksmith's shed, a gambling house and sheriff's office. Two things alone drew Alderman's populace from a better world—the fugitive could walk and drink unmolested here, and there was profit.

Next door to the Cash-King General Store and across street from the Lode Star Saloon stood Matt Springer's office. It was a square, board room with a couple of cots set back against one wall, a burnt-out, round-bellied stove, a desk, half a dozen assorted rifles in one corner, and a rusty safe wherein Sheriff Springer kept his records and such data his predecessors in office had left him. Springer was a sandy, raw-boned man in his early thirties. At one time and another he had been bronc-peeler, drifter, miner, stage driver, deputy and a

cowpuncher on more spreads than he could have named off-hand.

The sheriff's job at Alderman paid him ninety a month, and he had to feed himself. Springer had been down street at one of the saloons which was half restaurant, and came back along the noon-hot street with a toothpick stuck between his lips. There were six horses in a knot at the Lode Star Saloon's rack, all dusty from the north, streaked across flank and chests with the mark of lather. Four Running N animals stood at a post rail in a vacant lot between the blacksmith's shed and the Cash-King. Z Slash had hitched around corner from the Lode Star, and new dust was whipping up along the main stage road.

In front of the Cash-King, Frank Norcross, of Running N, stopped him. Norcross was a thick-set middle-aged man with gray, steady eyes and a stubby iron-gray beard. He had bought the present Running N sight unseen, and come across a thousand miles of sand and plains and range with a Panhandle trail herd, never knowing what he faced ahead till his cattle spread across the deep feed of the Rebellion Forks grass.

Norcross said, "Is there anything that you can do, Springer?"

Springer shifted the toothpick between his lips. He studied the new dust cloud a moment with a kind of distracted interest, and asked, "What would you suggest, Norcross? Just what would you do in my boots? A real sensible man, or even one with a half a head, would just saddle up, I reckon, lay his little tin star down on his desk with no particular regrets and try to get out across the Buckhorns before daylight failed. Or what?"

"I can't run," Frank Norcross said. "A man can't run with fifteen hundred head of cattle, grantin' either Bayle or Splain would stand off and watch him gather them. But I got five riders on Running N—five that will stick and fight behind me!"

Springer watched the fresh dust cloud rolling in under hooves. "There's five 404 hands to match 'em, Norcross," he said, and walked on with his lank, loose-jointed stride.

As he passed the opening between his office and the adjacent side of the Cash-King store, something else caught Springer's eye. He did not halt immediately, but turned as though casually inspecting some point of idle interest between the nearer timber edge and his own log-walled corral at the rear.

What Matt Springer saw was a bay, nondescript Spur horse, tied by reins alongside that corral. He walked on across to his office door, knocking it open with a boot as was his custom, and swung it shut with the slam of his heel. Then Springer looked up at the man sitting back on one corner of his battered desk.

SHERIFF SPRINGER was the slightly shorter, and he lacked the other's solid bulk and frame. For all of sixty seconds the two looked at each other. The rear door to the sheriff's office stood half open behind. Springer gently chewed the toothpick between his teeth.

He said finally, "So you're the man, huh?"

Morgan's eyes measured him with a steady speculation. "What's your own play in this, Sheriff? It won't change anything, but it might make a difference if I knew."

"Yeah? I been ponderin' that same question," Springer said. "It's kinda like askin' a man if he'd sooner get shot when he wasn't lookin' or knowin' about it aforehand. This job looked pretty easy once. I just sort of fell into it—last spring that was—and thought I might as well loaf around this shack as sit a saddle out in the boilin' sun. Somehow it don't seem to have worked. I'd just as soon be standin' in the middle of a fire right now. Health, long life an' prosperity are off yonder across the Buckhorns somewhere, and maybe a man could still ride it afore dark. But if you mean, am I playin' favorites—no! Norcross at Running N is the only plain honest man in this country. He's got five riders."

Morgan said, "There's somethin' like half a thousand head of cattle Bayle's got collected on the Big Spring Bench right now. X Bar C offers a standin' reward at San Miguel of five dollars a head for strays or rustled stock returned to its range. It would mean anyhow a couple thousand dollars. Good pay for several deputies."

"Money," Springer said, "can buy some lovely coffins. X Bar C could show its appreciation that way—only where would you get the deputies? Mister, what's the odds?

The way you talk you know enough to see plain before your nose. There's Bayle across street now in the Lode Star with half a dozen riders. Z Slash has joined him there—waitin'. They're all waitin'. There's twice as many more out in the hills. What's it look like to you? Just how far are you willin' to go yourself? I'm tellin' you a match will touch it off!"

Morgan nodded. "I wanted to know where you stood, was all. I'm lightin' the match!"

SHERIFF SPRINGER watched him with eyes that had taken on a heavy, sleepy-lidded look. Morgan eased his big frame up and turned. The solid bulk of him was slack and almost careless in movement. He did not glance again at Springer. He walked across to the street-front door and pulled it open. He stopped there, and stood leaned idly against the left casement. His face was solid, the high cheek-boned structure of it unyielding and as expressionless as brown dust. Springer's watchful eyes never left Morgan for an instant.

404 had slowed to a trot. They pulled rein and dismounted just this side of the stage wagonyards. Two men in the lead cut across street dust toward the Lode Star Saloon. This meant something in itself, another shifting of thin-drawn, strained alliances toward power. Norcross alone was standing on this side of the street with three of his crew. One of the 404 men turned to say some word. Suddenly he halted there in the middle of the street while his companion went on a pace. Those behind him came abreast.

One of the men ahead said, "What's the matter, Art?" and turned.

Seconds of time, passing, flowed into the length of a moment. There was now an utter silence along the outside street. From the Lode Star came the noise of boots scraping the floor, of glasses clinked along the bar. Some voice laughed gutturally above the low drone of conversation there. The 404 men in a group changed the course of their direction across street, and stopped under a lean-to front two doors up the other way.

Morgan took out papers and tobacco, rolling a deliberate smoke between his big fingers. Then—as abruptly as the chop of a knife—that low hum and racket inside the Lode Star stopped. A head, joined by others, peered over the soaped lower half of the saloon's single street-front window.

There was no hurry. Presently one batwing door of the place swung half open. Waiting horses at the street edge rail blocked across and half covered this. The other wing of the door whipped back. Three men had stepped out on the rough plank strip of walk before the saloon, two shifting to the right with spaced, careful steps, keeping that partial cover of the horses. Bayle came through between two animals, without hurry.

The disproportionate length of his bent, small legs and the thick, ox-muscled size of his upper body was fully evident afoot. The boots on his little shapely feet had been freshly polished in the saloon; Tex Bayle was inordinately proud of his womanish feet. His head with its flat, squarish features was thrust slightly forward. His bulky shoulders rolled a little. There was no question of his purpose.

Morgan had left the sheriff's door, and was now stepping out into the soft dust of the street. He began walking a straight-line path toward Bayle. Each arm swung a scant six inches, back and forth with the measure of his stride, the heel of his right hand just brushing holster leather. The even measure of Morgan's pace continued. Nothing varied about this tall, solid man.

THIRTY yards would have spanned the width of street between building faces. Under the hot, high sun the street gave back no sound. The distance narrowed, halved. Bayle's shoulders hunched, thrown forward. At ten yards, he stopped. His right hand hung even with his holstered gun now, thick fingers bent and quivering. But something held his hand. Something in the depths of Bayle's eyes changed.

It was like a fibre breaking, suddenly weakening the whole inner core of force and strength in him so that others snapped. Indecision gripped him. His tiny, wide-spaced eyes had the glistening look of wet glass. The range was now point-blank.

Morgan said, "Go ahead, Bayle! You come out here to do it—*now go ahead!*"

He came on till the space between them was less than arm's reach. The solid line of his lips drew down. For the length of thirty seconds, while this street was deathly

quiet, he looked into Bayle's face. A tiny muscle began to twitch in one of Bayle's cheeks.

Then, without word, violently Morgan struck Bayle's gun arm with the back-fling of his left. Before Bayle knew what was up. Morgan had drawn the holstered gun, flipped it around and extended it butt forward to Bayle. His right now held his own.

Bayle began to quiver. He took a slow step back. "I'll pick my own time when I'm ready. And the place. You can't stampede me into anything—!"

Morgan held the gun a moment, his face impassive as when he had started across the street. Then he dropped the weapon, careless, into the road dust, turned deliberately around and started back. One of the two who had come out of the saloon beside Bayle, the pale, cold-eyed youngster, moved clear of the horses along walk in front of the Lode Star, arms hooked at his sides.

From the door of the sheriff's office, Springer's voice cut across at him, "Watch it there! I'll down the first man of you that makes a play on the side!"

The muzzle end of a rifle protruded from the sheriff's door. Behind it, Matt Springer chewed a frayed toothpick. His face still held a sleepy, heavy-lidded look. He shook his head as Morgan came inside.

"All right," Springer said. "I ain't never been the kind to make a plain damn' fool of myself, an' I don't know how it's happened this time. But I'm backin' you up!"

Morgan nodded. "Thanks. I needed you, Springer. Get whatever men you can hire or bribe to sit deputy saddles, and be out at Taggart's Cross Bar as soon as you can make it."

"Jake Taggart's poison in himself." Springer drew a long, deep breath.

"All the same, he'll fight! Because he's got to, and there ain't no other way!" Morgan said.

IV

THE death of Jake Taggart's two older sons of other violence in the years Cross Bar had spread the brand across Rebellion Forks, left only Lance, the younger, and Dave Taggart, who had been born a year before Sally to take up guns in this—probably the only fight that Cross Bar had no strength to win. Lance was like his father but with a weaker, shifty grain in him. Dave Taggart was a smaller, slighter man than either, with a firm and yet gentler cast to his features and his mother's eyes and raven hair. One leg had been crippled under a falling horse when he was a youngster.

It was Dave Taggart who came from that little end office room in the big old house and limped to the gallery edge, looking down at Morgan in the saddle. He said, "Jake ain't here now. He's rode for the lower line camp to bring in what men there are, and Lance has gone the other way. Both ought to be home right soon."

Looking past him, Morgan could see again that flame-like figure of the girl in her bright calico dress, her dark hair piled low and parted smoothly, and even the little pulse that beat in the hollow of her throat, as she had stood against the wall of the house that morning when he left. He shook his head.

"How many riders do you figure you can count on?"

"You're that Association man that was here this mornin'?" At Morgan's nod, Dave Taggart went on, "There should be four at the lower camp. Three where Lance has gone. A couple hands we had on steady payroll here at homequarters quit last week. It might be the same at either camp. There's two-three more over east, but we can't reach 'em short of ridin' to the farther Fork."

"Keep whatever men come in right here at home," Morgan said.

As he turned his mount Dave Taggart was studying him with a sharp, curious interest. "Somewhere—sometime I seen you before, ain't I?"

Swinging away, Morgan made no reply.

He was carrying one of Sheriff Springer's rifles in a boot under his leg. Once more he cut for the upper valley, climbing the rising timbered slope toward the open swell of ridge above. Sunlight slanted now, the high yellow warmth of noon turned faintly deeper with a reddish hue, the swales and depressions of this middle country already misting slightly, and shadows running in against the western hills. There was a deep and soundless silence across the land, and Lee Morgan

wondered where and when he would hear the first gunshot. He chose his way with greater care.

Once he crossed track of another rider heading this same way—a small, quick-footed pony, he saw by the stride. Out across to the south, where no road went through, a streak of dust lifted occasionally, too far away to distinguish any mount or man, or numbers. This silence was too deep. The air itself seemed heavy, weighted, no stir of breeze across the Rebellion Forks. Morgan tethered the animal he rode to an edge of jackpine thicket, and climbed the course of a shallow gully to the ridge crest above. He sat there, back braced against a boulder, and watched the middle country steadily.

The sun went lower. The dust to the south disappeared, men and animals no longer moved there, or sign of them was lost in the thickening bottom haze. A new line streaked up along the Alderman road. Across in nearby timber a jay started chattering, and in a moment some late marauding hawk rose against the sky with a pair of jays circling. Off there, the other way, each crag and butte along the Buckhorns was lined with shadow but lit with red across its face. Then, while Morgan's gaze was turned that way, he heard the expected thing.

One shot broke heavily across the timbered gradual flat beyond. It was followed by two others, close and quick. Morgan sat there a moment longer, the slackness gone from his big frame. There was something puzzled on his brown, solid features. He went back to his mount, and circled westward through low cover to avoid the crest of open ridge. He breasted fifty yards of open top-ground finally at a run, cutting back. A stringer of dust volleyed up from some farther opening and lay in a lazy, gray diffusion across the timber ranks. That instant a gun smashed loose once more.

A RICOCHET ripped up from rock under hoof. Morgan drove into thicket beyond. He yanked the rifle from its boot. He stopped, and then quite plainly heard the hard burst of this borne back in a diminished, thin-voiced echo from the far Buckhorn cliffs. A horse was running in the timber growth with dull muffled hoofs, and Morgan raked spurs into his animal again. Within a hundred yards, he slid to a stop. Now there was only that heavy-weighted silence, deep with the forest under-gloom. The light was dense enough so that he saw the sharp, red blossom of new fire upon it. He had cover here, and brought his animal around against the three-foot trunk of a pine.

He shot back twice, using the rifle; and so learned this nondescript Spur animal he had ridden part of a night and all this day would not stand while a man fired from saddle. The underbranches of a limb smashed into his chest and face before he could control the beast. He quit saddle, bootheels digging troughs, till his weight on the bit swung the horse's barrel for shelter. At forty or fifty yards a rifle was spilling out its load with a steady regularity, fast as shells could be ejected. A man yelled. Another horse started into motion. But no accurate fire was possible through this dim forested under-light. Morgan jammed his own long-gun back into boot.

A headlong, growing anger threw him into saddle. He heard both horsemen thudding into a run, the rifle as quickly silenced. Both were riding across the timbered flat as they must have traveled from the point of those first-heard shots. And Morgan thought of that other distant dust to the south, trying to connect it in his mind. The tall pine growth thinned suddenly into one of the scattered openings to be found all across this timbered middle land. The flare of sundown was just reaching its high flood of color into the sky. Morgan swerved and followed edge cover, jumping his mount over windfalls with raking spurs. Halfway around the clearing's end, he stopped.

He sat saddle there a while. Then he turned and started back the other way abruptly, the lines drawn deeper in his solid face. He continued at a steady cat-trot, and as he rode thought presently to reload the two shells fired from rifle magazine. There was something tight and bitter now about the set of his mouth. Within half a mile instinct led his animal into those dim, faint ruts of what had once been a road, although the thickened under-gloom now showed little sign of this trail.

On the lighter edge of that wide meadow space where the old abandoned cabin stood, he saw a mount with an empty saddle moving and cropping the deep grass. One rein had been broken at the bit; the animal sidled around in the half-light, dragging the other. The vacant cabin stood blocked small and dim across that opening, the high-risen flare of light in the west all done. Morgan paused, everything about him stiff. He rode on straight across toward the cabin.

On the old sagged porch in front of the place, the tiny flame of a match was struck, burned and dropped. Another mount was standing there in the doorway, and he dismounted at a distance. He heard the quick intake of breath in a woman's throat, half a sob.

He said, "What's happened?" walking on.

He could see her dimly, rising suddenly to face him from where she had been kneeling on the porch, and knew what pony had left that track he had cut across the head of Cross Bar's valley. She must have recognized him then. But Morgan had reached the edge of the porch before the sound of Sally Taggart's voice came brokenly.

"I—I don't know. Three of them were riding in across the meadow there," she said. "Just opposite the cabin one rider turned and—and said something to this man. It wasn't a quarrel. He was smiling when he said it—I was close enough to see. I'd left my pony in the timber and was waiting here. They stopped. The other rider, the one behind, brought up a gun without saying anything and shot this man between the shoulders. After he fell, the man who had been smiling leaned from saddle and fired twice more into his body. Then the two rode on at a gallop. It was like that—it was murder! But I—I don't know who he is. . . ."

MORGAN had crossed the porch, dropped beside the small, knotty figure there, and it needed no light to tell him the man was quite dead. Morgan did not move.

She was saying, "I wasn't sure he was dead. Somehow it seemed I ought to get him inside, before I rode after help. I tried and brought him this far. But when I'd got my horse and stopped again, then. . . ."

"Yes," Morgan said.

He got up finally, and felt inside one pocket for matches. He went inside the cabin. It was strange how well he remembered and knew the place in the dark after so many years. The old built-in corner bunk still stood there, spread with a dry pine needle mattress the last furtive rider to occupy the house had left. He went outside again.

"Do—do you know who he is?"

"Yes. His name is Charlie Beckman," Morgan said. "We worked together."

He carried Charlie Beckman's slight body inside to the corner bunk, where ten years ago Cabel Morgan had drawn his last breath, a bullet through his chest. It all came back very vividly to Lee Morgan now. He could see again the flicker of pinewood logs on the hearth, and the path the light threw across Cabel Morgan's lined, solid face, a face not unlike his own nowadays, and his mother standing there so silent. Lee Morgan had been fifteen then, a lank, bony boy, tall as his mother, who had been dark and pretty like the girl outside. And of a sudden the heart in that fifteen-year-old boy had broken, and he slipped to his knees.

"Pa! Pa, I'll come back," he promised bitterly. "Some day I'll come back and wipe Jake Taggart's Cross Bar outfit off the face of the earth! If it takes a life time, Pa! I won't forget!"

He could remember all the straining effort that it had taken for his father, lying there, to turn his head. And the last words Cabel Morgan ever said: "No, son! There's bigger jobs in this world for a man than vengeance. What Cross Bar has done is no different than the way of a hundred other outfits, big and small, across the free-range grass. Or a thousand others. Taggart ain't a killer himself—he didn't do this, or hire it done. It's range he wants. But to gain that end he is willing to hire riding men among the outlaw drifters and use their force behind him—and finally that same wolf-breed kind will turn on him. There is a job for a man, Lee! Law must come. It will take men to bring it!"

He had called his wife's name once, and then forever Cabel Morgan's lips were still. Next morning the boy had dug that

grave on the spruce-covered knoll behind the cabin, and fashioned the pickets which still guarded it.

Deep buried somewhere in the past of this hard-faced, knotty little man named Charlie Beckman, had been some like story which would never be told. Wages alone were not enough to hire men for this kind of job. There was no compromise, no truce on either side, in this business. It was war to the end.

Then Lee Morgan went outside to the girl waiting on the sagged old porch. He could dimly see the pale oval of her face and white hands in what little light still came from the west and the stars appearing in the east. That morning at Cross Bar he had known she was beautiful. Some man with a flair for words had once said of all this outland range that it was country "good enough for men and dogs, but hell on horses and women." The women had no choice. Years ago Jake Taggart had begun a course which was now this girl's innocent heritage, as it had been her mother's. No power on earth could stay the inevitable end, in one form or another. It had been written long ago. And that deep, suppressed anger in Lee Morgan against the old heedless wilfulness of it made his voice harsh.

"You were waiting here—why was that?" he asked.

"I wanted—wanted to see you, and I thought you'd come up here sometime. I'd been waiting most of the afternoon."

"You knew me then this morning?"

"Yes. Yes, something is the same, some look about you. Or maybe I'm remembering your father. Cross Bar ran you out because another outfit here was too close. I understand that now. I didn't so long ago. But I wanted to ask, how is your mother? She was kind to me once, those years ago, when my own mother. . . ."

LEE MORGAN thought of a little girl with dark pigtails and eyes too large for her small face, ten or eleven years old, stealing away from Cross Bar on an old bareback pony to ride up here for what comfort another woman could give.

"She's living now at San Miguel," he said. "When I came through there last week, she wanted me to be sure and ask about Sally Taggart."

"It's kind of her to have remembered. . . . Oh, I'm not asking you to forgive Cross Bar for what's happened," Sally Taggart said in a tragic voice. "But I came up here hoping—hoping something could be done to stop what's coming. Everybody knows and sees it. You can feel it in the very air over the Rebellion Forks, see it in every rider that goes along the trails or road. It's been building between Cross Bar and Tex Bayle and Splain, drawing Running N and 404 nearer conflict, with Z Slash always threatening, for months. For years, I guess."

"Those years ago something could have been done," Morgan said. "Now only the one hard way is left! No other!"

But for him Lee Morgan had known that morning when he left Cross Bar and saw her standing on the porch, so gracefully dark and lovely in young womanhood, that she was the girl he could not forget. He was twenty-five, and there had been no other woman in these lonely, hard-lived years just past. With some men it was like that. And then as they stood before the old abandoned cabin with all its bitter memories and stirred sorrow of the past, both heard the sound of guns rising from the valley head beyond or along the Cross Bar road in quick running volume that filled the distant air. . . .

V

THE noise rattled off below, and racing down through those last top thickets in the valley head, Morgan could see scattered pin points of gun flame laced against the night. That earlier sign of movement lost to the south, two riders who had led Charlie Beckman across the cabin flat and killed him there while one man spoke smiling, running their horses on southward—these pieces began to fit together in some loose pattern in Morgan's brain. Dust reached across the valley head in clouds and scattered stringers, dim gray under the high starlight, where the course of this outflung battle had started and in the end continued toward Cross Bar's yards. A loose horse went past as he reached the edge of valley floor, and Morgan turned in the saddle.

He yelled, "Stay back—stay here!" and the next instant saw a rider loom across

his front. The man fired. Another gun, just to the right, began exploding, and thus suddenly he had reached the tail end of that other fight. A heavier roar began to roll up-valley, filling every draw and ravine with the drum of its thunder. Morgan was cursing this animal under him that would not stand under gunfire, while he had Colt's out and was shooting at the sudden quartering range each jump. A horse spilled and went over. He saw some dim-formed rider roll, climb up, hunched and hurt, legging it for the nearest brush. A voice was shouting with all the strength of lungs, and another flash had opened with a whipped, long tongue. A smother of dust, thick as fog, swept into his face.

He was trying to reload while the animal under him stampeded, jamming shells into cylinder, losing some. But the pieces of that loose pattern were fitting suddenly in Morgan's brain, and then he could have told just about what had happened here. The dust rolled in waves. Again he was clear of it, hauling on the bit. The rifle still in saddle-boot was of no use on a horse like this. He had thumbed a final shell into six-gun, and the scattered shooting here was all around him again.

Another animal came through on his heels. He turned, and shouted, *"Cut aside! Get out of this!"* The other horse raced even, neck to neck, and Sally Taggart paid no heed, or she did not hear his words. On the left one gun was flanking in and another closed behind. He raked spurs deep, trying to shove in against her mount, and fire and manage this hammer-headed beast under him at once. That swelling roar of battle down valley had grown to a concentrated, steady tumult of shots all piled together, rising against the pound and race of hoofs and broken firing here.

Morgan sat around in a kicking saddle and with a jerking burst of fire drove the side gun back. It added fresh panic to the beast under him, and once more the dust of riders and fighting that had gone ahead threw its blind haze across the way. Morgan worked shells loose and filled three empties in his cylinder. He lost Sally Taggart here.

He managed to drive his fright-crazy mount right, then left, and was sure she was running out ahead. Through the fog of this he saw the first dull illumination of a blaze that in thirty seconds had reached into a lapping pillar of flame, and knew one of the yard haystacks at Cross Bar had been lit. It flared like tinder, all loose and dry, flame covering the head of the stack at once. The second stack beside the corrals was bound to catch and go, probably taking the barn with it. Men and horses, the course of attack and fight became visible under a shooting light that lit the place like day. A spreading illumination reached up-valley through the dust and confusion.

Four or five men had been caught between the old hewn-log house and barn where they were being forced to make a stand in the open Several guns had circled wide and come in on the rear of the house from the timber there, and they now held the far corner. Other fire was cutting back along the length of the wide-spaced gallery, from Taggart's office room door and the cover of end logs. At least six or eight riders from this upper valley ambush-and-run fight had gathered against the far side of the barn, rifles kicking a steady roar of lead across yards—their number growing momentarily as more men reached the spot, swung from saddles in back shelter and sought the barn corners.

JAKE TAGGART had been caught in the valley head above by the large force moving across from the south, as Taggart rode through with four men from Cross Bar's lower camp. Lance Taggart had reached homequarters with three hands an hour earlier; and just before sundown Sheriff Springer rode in with a couple of Running N's force and a lone townsman from Alderman. Springer had left horses at the corrals. This group had been standing on the squared-log gallery steps when the first noise of shooting in the upper valley reached them, rising into the full throat of battle. Lance, the Cross Bar men and Dave Taggart had run immediately for the corrals and horses. Springer's animals were still standing saddled there.

Three men of Jake Taggart's force had ridden through down valley and, meeting reinforcements from the ranch yards, had turned and made a shifting stand of it. Springer's ready-saddled horses had been taken by Lance, and by the time Springer found other saddles and caught corralled animals, the stand up-valley was being

driven back. Springer and his men had started back for the solid cover of the house.

They had then met gunfire coming from the timber fringe behind, and had made the office corner of the house against it. Cross Bar, now retreating in a broken rush, had been six men strong, reaching the corrals again. One man had fallen there. They drove on for the house, and midway up the wide slope of yards had been targets for the guns Springer had met, now estanched against the far end of the house. The stack had been touched off. Dave Taggart had got men down in shelter of a water trough that offered the only scant yard cover between under cross-fire from the barn and house, with a light rising too bright to rush for any other barricade.

Morgan was seeing the results of all this, measuring the course of it, as he ran his animal quartering across beyond the barn for higher ground along the side timber edge. A shadow rode before him somewhere there, and as he pulled rifle and hit the earth, he knew it was Sally Taggart's pony. He began heading in afoot, gauging the range, and had fired four shells when she came beside him. He dropped at that distance, sat back with knees to steady barrel and fired shell after shell, his range angled on the rear of the barn. The second stack was catching now.

When the rifle was empty, he thrust it back to her and scooped a fistful of shells from pocket into her hands wordlessly. It was long six-gun range, but he drew and kept up the steady volume of lead till she had the rifle magazine filled again. The battle had four points to it now, Morgan's fire alone commanding the rear of the barn. A confusion spread there, and guns began to streak back at him.

The blaze of the second stack rose like the first in a straight, towering pillar, and, beading rifle sights, Morgan had plain targets in the reflected glow around the barn. Men took cover from his side angle behind a down pony. Corralled stock had broken a gate and gone through, and the Cross Bar valley was full of saddled and loose running horses. His steady fire kept slamming down without pause. Then some change became evident in the two points of battle at the house. Springer with his three men, one wounded slightly by a bullet that had grazed his hip, had given up the position at the office end of the house and moved around the building to the rear.

In the high burning flare of the stacks below, some man ran forward from the far end of the house, shooting back as he ran. He swerved and tried to reach the gallery front door. Rifles from the trough cover had plain view of this, and he was cut down midway in the run. The bulk of the house cut off Morgan's direct view. Burning trash was descending from the updraft of the furious conflagrations, and the roar and multitudinous explosions in the straw was drowning out the beat of gunfire at this distance. The rifle in his hands was through for a second time before Morgan saw three or four men working back toward timber, and realized that his move had carried.

HE was running out of rifle ammunition. A spot on the dry shake roof of the barn had taken flame from the rain of sparks and burning tinder trash. Another horse held there had gone down; every man had found some kind of rear cover. The steady cut of lead across yards had slackened correspondingly, and Dave Taggart chose this time to carry out a rush from the trough toward house. Four men behind him, he met Springer coming back from timber at a labored run. The air was getting thick with smoke. A too-long repressed fury filled these men. They united without word or command and fell in behind Springer. Springer headed on.

Two belated riders from the upper valley had come down, swerved away from the barn and were opening from the near side at Morgan. Much lead had been embedded on this slope, but his stand had been out of sight of that force at the barn. Morgan gave up the position then, urging the girl to run, and spread his fire. Behind the barn, a man jumped and was legging it away. In the middle of his run Morgan spilled him down. He was breathing with a deep and heavy effort, as though fighting with his fists.

Less than a third of the way toward the house, Sally Taggart met her older brother limping at Springer's side. The rest of the force kept on to meet Morgan. Some settled there and began to shoot. Others worked nearer. It was a solid volley then,

smashing, splintering the rear side of the barn at an angle that drove lead flattened against the boards and cut up strips of dust along the ground.

The roof of the barn was burning strongly now. Flame had dropped through and caught in the stalls and straw below. Then three men jumped for it at once from cover of a down horse. Two never reached the safety of out-shadows or the corner of the barn beyond. There was a red inferno flaming up inside the barn. The others had to rush—while the guns kept on. Two had climbed through a stall window and been inside. How many reached shadows, found horses somewhere out across the valley and rode, Morgan never knew. But there had been a force of eleven or twelve in the end, collected in this shelter to sweep the Cross Bar yards.

The sound of this long, running battle and the stand at Cross Bar had been plainly audible across the Rebellion Forks, pounding on the heavy weighted air tonight with a sullen rumble, reaching down to Alderman town. A patch of glowing red lay on the heavens, visible for miles. The place was still lit bright as day; and for hours till dawn, another morning, flame still smoldered and burned in the ruin.

Matt Springer's rawboned face was a grimy mask. Lead had clipped the fleshy part of one forearm and it dripped blood. He studied Morgan with inscrutable eyes. "You're lucky!" he said. "Lucky once—and I guess this makes twice. Luke Splain's dead up there alongside the house. He brought the attack down on the place."

"Jake Taggart—?" Morgan questioned.

One of the Cross Bar men answered, "I seen Jake slip his saddle in the upper valley. Bayle was leadin' that attack. I got off an' tried to lift him—but Jake was already dead. Lance fell beyond the corrals as we rode back."

Still the full extent of ruin was not known. There was a lean-to woodshed behind the old Cross Bar house, and here one of the men in the attack had hidden, overturning a tin of kerosene in the dark. Smelling the oil, he had struck match and lit it when he left. The shed was aflame, piled with ready fuel, burning against the hewn side logs of the old Cross Bar house. The first knowledge they had of this was the sight of fire breaking through into the roof. Only small personal articles and keepsakes from the front part of the house could be saved.

As the new blaze reached its height, Frank Norcross rode in from Running N with the rest of his crew behind him, horses run and dripping. Riders from 404 had arrived moments earlier, and these two factions of past conflict over boundary land faced each other stiffly. Springer stood between.

"LOOK around you!" Springer said in his raw-throated voice. "Look around—and try to remember! It ought to be enough! Pretty sight, ain't it? Then get out and bring us horses. Strip saddle off any down animal. There's plenty loose stock for mounts."

Norcross lingered. "What now, Springer?"

"I reckon this is what you was askin' for in town today, Norcross," Springer told him. "But I don't know how it happened. I don't know how it could a-happened, thinkin' back. Luck itself don't explain it. All I know is we're followin' a man that don't stop at anything an' lets nothin' bluff him down. We're headin' up for the Bench tonight. Bayle and whatever men are still a-saddle will be makin' a try to get cattle out ahead there now."

At the plank bridge along the Cross Bar road beyond, they met three Z Slash riders. Z Slash stood back undecidedly. Then after a mile had passed, turning toward the Buckhorns now, the three caught up and fell in behind. This was always the way it worked, Morgan knew. Z Slash had shifted behind new-formed power, the same way a few hours ago it would have backed up Tex Bayle. This was a story old as such conflict. And the aftermath of too much such knowledge, too much destruction, violence, fighting, was like a heavy weight upon him which he could not throw off. It was not finished yet. . . .

VI

SEVENTEEN men of them rode across the rim of Big Spring Bench that dawn. The hoof-trampled sign of cattle was everywhere across the dust and grass. Perhaps ten riders of the old Bayle-Splain crew had got ahead through the hills from

the Cross Bar fight or been waiting here on guard with the stock. It was immediately evident that enough hands had assembled to throw cattle together in the night and start a drive across county lines toward the barren Red Bluff hills. Light came stronger as they cantered across the high strip of open bench.

Springer jerked a thumb to the left. "Shack they use is over there," he said, "where the spring has cut out a gully in the rim. But I reckon we'll hit wide track across the head land yonder. Sure thing they've moved out."

Morgan rode awhile, considering something else deep in his mind. It might have been a hunch. Some dark and over-powering depression that he could not shake off had been with him all the night past. He rode with Springer, big and solid-formed in the saddle, and heard the talk of other men. But his eyes saw only the ruin of Cross Bar, a meadow flat above where ten years ago a boy had buried his father . . . he could feel the slackness of Charlie Beckman's limp weight. And wherever he looked he could see Sally Taggart's eyes, dark in their depths with a woman's gentleness and the tragedy of this night. The price was too much.

He shook his head now. "Keep hold of the men," he said. "You're liable to hit it anywhere beyond, and it'll be a running fight. Keep after 'em, Springer—right to the end! There isn't any other way. Bayle will be back if he ever gets out now. I'll have a look-see at this shack."

He turned away. Many crooked cattle trails converged toward the Big Spring water. But on the rim of the bench he found a different kind of trail, deep-marked with the calks of many shod hoofs climbing up and down. He moved his animal into it. Thick timber closed, and within fifty yards he saw the space of lower clearing where the log shack stood. Morgan stopped there a moment. A door in the cabin's face hung half open. A window, facing him, gave back only the opaque glitter of daylight across its panes. Some indefinable sense of warning came to him from the place, vague as the half-formed hunch which had brought him here. Then he shifted wide shoulders and went against it, as deliberately as he met everything.

He had reached the near edge of open ground before he saw the rump of a horse standing behind the shack. At that same moment the pale, bleak-faced youngster he had first seen with Bayle on the Cross Bar road came from the door and turned. Morgan saw the set of his body, bracing itself suddenly, his restless hands twitching at his sides. Twenty years old perhaps, this boy's eyes were killer's eyes. Some malice and hate against the world and a badness must have been born in his heart. He reached and drew immediately, and started forward with the same motion. He was fast.

His first shell exploded as Morgan was coming from saddle. He had fired three shots by the time he reached the near corner of the shack, still coming straight ahead, before Morgan pressed trigger. The span of time was hardly longer than as many seconds. Morgan came a step away from his mount. The boy swung around, lurched sidewise along the near end of the shack, clutching at a right shoulder. There he stopped, got the gun transferred into his left hand, vicious and deadly still as a hurt rattler. He fired again.

Fifteen or twenty paces would have measured the distance to the swung door of the shack where Bayle's head, one powerful, thick shoulder and Bayle's gun-hand appeared. Bayle had just had time to cross the end of room within from the fireplace where a pot of stew had been left in the ash from an earlier meal prepared here. Bayle shot instantly, the roar so hard on the heels of the other gun that the two were almost one; then he fired twice more as Morgan began a deliberate-spaced run for shelter at the cabin's end. Bayle's third shot tore a broken six-inch slit in Morgan's shirt just above the belt. Morgan ran four or five paces. Still faced with that twisted, pale youth, he cut him down under the outside window of the shack. His one shot thrown back at Bayle had splintered slivers from the door-jamb and ricocheted along the logs of the shack.

MORGAN stopped. He faced around instead, and turned directly toward Bayle. All this had transpired with the swiftness guns could be thumbed into action, explosions ripping loose. Bayle jerked back so that only a hand and the side of

his face were exposed, as he fired again. Distance had narrowed. Morgan came toward the doorway now, the same way Bayle had seen him cross the dusty width of street at Alderman less than twenty-four hours ago. There were two shells left in Morgan's gun, since, like most riding-men, he carried an empty under hammer. With the fall of each successive stride they exploded—and both failed to touch the margin of their mark. He heard Bayle's boots break back across the cabin room, and only then did Morgan realize that Bayle's gun was likewise dead. He drove on for the cabin door ahead.

Bayle had run for a rifle in scabbard which leaned in the corner by the fireplace. His flat-featured face turned back toward Morgan. Bayle whirled and threw the Colt's short-gun at Morgan's body as he came into the doorway. The weapon hit Morgan in the chest heavily, and he staggered. The rifle stuck in scabbard. Where a man could have yanked it free all in one motion a-saddle, this way it took both Bayle's hands, one on stock and the other on leather boot, to pull the length of barrel out. Morgan's left fist struck across one shoulder and hit him on the side of the head.

Bayle had the rifle in his grip, but without space to level it. He swung and chopped with it like a club. Morgan drove in and caught the barrel. Bayle strained with massive strength of shoulders and his powerful arms to jerk it from Morgan, and then to twist the barrel from his grip. He kicked for Morgan's groin and both men went down. The rifle fell underneath. Bayle came half up, still with a hold on it, and Morgan, on his knees, slugged with one hand at the side of Bayle's head. Bayle's mouth was bleeding.

He twisted over, throwing himself around on the floor and kicked Morgan in the ribs, knocking him backward with the weight of the thrust. Morgan's head raked the rough side logs. Bayle tried to climb to knees and shoot. With the wall behind, Morgan flung himself back and again caught hold of the rifle barrel. The two men rolled toward the fireplace, and somewhere in that straining scuffle, Bayle let go of the gun and fastened his muscular, heavy-boned fingers on Morgan's throat. There was no sound except the dull thud of blows and boots, and the agonized rasp of breathing. Morgan finally caught Bayle's free arm. Unable to shake the man's throat-hold, he bore over on the arm with both his own till the back of Bayle's free hand went into the hot fireplace coals where a blaze had cooked food before dawn.

AN awful straining went through all Bayle's body and then he loosened, and the sudden renewed rush of air into lungs left Morgan dizzy. Bayle threw him off. Bayle came up, staggering on out-spread legs that were too short for his big, hunch-shouldered upper body. The rifle now lay behind Morgan. Bayle slugged from side to side, unable to make Morgan cover or give a pace. There was a smell of singed hair and flesh within the room. Bayle's tiny, wide-set eyes were like an animal's. He gave it up suddenly, turned and at a stumbling run made for the cabin's door.

Morgan followed halfway up the room. Then he turned and went back for the rifle neither man had yet fired. Steps weaving and unsteady now, he went on to the window. Bayle had dropped beside the doubled body of that bleak-faced boy with a killer's heart, fallen out there. Bayle's first thought was to get the boy's gun. There was one shell left in it.

He was running on across the clearing when Morgan's voice reached him—*"Bayle, you got a gun! You'll never have another chance to use it!"*

Bayle swung around and fired, all with one motion. The noise of the rifle was a harder, sharper explosion from the window frame, spaced deliberately. Bayle shook his head from side to side. His knees gave way; he stumbled headlong. . . . And as the echoes flattened, far away, where the Big Spring Bench rose to the rough headland, there was the sound of other broken firing like a whisper that continued and still occasionally lingered on the air after half an hour had passed, running farther.

VII

IT was late afternoon when Lee Morgan cut across back-country from the river ford, riding alone, and moved toward the meadow flat above Cross Bar where the old abandoned cabin stood. He came along

the timber back of the house, and once more paused on the spruce-thicketed knoll where a square of wire and pickets stood and where—ten years ago—a boy had buried his father.

He stood there a while, remembering. Recalling those last words Cabel Morgan had spoken, "There is a job for a man, Lee. . . . Law must come. It will take men to bring it, son." Lee Morgan had fulfilled a mute pledge that fifteen-year-old boy had made. It had brought him back to the Rebellion Forks in the end.

More plainly now than at any hour through the night past, he could see Sally Taggart's eyes, the slim oval of her face, and the tall gentle dignity which was so much a part of the girl. He could remember every detail of her, knowing what the cost of this had been for her.

But he had reached the edge of the sagged old porch of this abandoned cabin before he saw her standing in the doorway there before him. The porch was littered with what small odds and ends and personal things had been saved from the fire of the Cross Bar house. For a long while Morgan could only stand and look at her, forgetting speech. She moved one hand.

"Dave thought we might bring these things up here," she said. "There isn't any other place where we can live, while he puts up a new house at Cross Bar. He'll be rebuilding now. Dave is different than either father or Lance were."

Morgan came nearer, and suddenly all the bitterness of that night came out in his voice. "Sally! Sally, believe me—there wasn't any other way. I could have turned and gone back as I came. But nothing could have stopped it in the ei[ght]. Not so long as Bayle or Splain or any oth[er] like them was a power on this range!"

The depths of her eyes met his. "I've known that, Lee. If not before—then ever since last night! Have you forgotten I was there beside you?"

"No, not forgotten." His voice was husky, shaken. "Sally, when I saw my mother in San Miguel and she asked about you, she also wanted me to say she'd like to have you come and visit her."

Her head was near, the dark smoothness of her hair drawn back to the low knot she wore at the nape of her neck. The past for each of them had been much the same. Each had lost loved things here, and the gentle quiet of her woman's strength stood as firmly as his own had ever been. She was very close, and nodded.

"Yes, I'd like that."

"Now," he said. "We'll cross the Buckhorns tonight."

Without knowing how it had happened, he held her in his arms. In that moment Lee Morgan knew the purpose of an old half-formed desire, and saw the future plain before him. There was no better grassland than lay here in the timber-fringed meadows and pockets of the Rebellion River country. He had savings to buy his own start in cattle. This land was just developing. He had a part to play in that. Alderman would be a different kind of a town someday. Honest brands would be running the Buckhorn hill country where before there had been only outlaw irons. Some of this she much have seen in his face, looking up into it.

"Sally, we both belong here," he said. "And later we'll come back—together."

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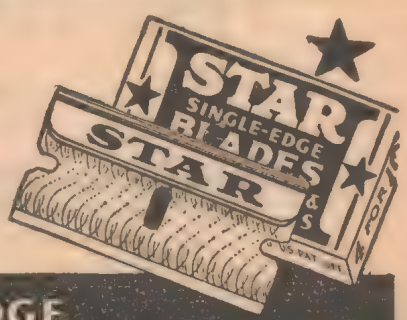

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The killer knew in that instant the fullness of horror. He saw Starns' finger tighten on the trigger . . . his ears were filled with a terrible, crashing, thundering. . . .

THE JUDAS BULLET

By JOHN STARR

An invite to a killing. . . . Big Jim Starns had sealed his Colts' with a Bible oath—and already the vengeance pack was gathering for a cold-meat kill!

MARSHAL STARNS sent his smoking .44 splashing into the *acequia,* and swore never to kill another man. For Starns to do that—after having cleaned up Mesquite—was to open the gate in invitation to every killer and snake to come in and do his worst. There were plenty who would do just that.

And even then Gil Purdy, the snakiest of the lot, was riding toward Mesquite. A killer, Purdy, who no longer bothered to notch his guns. A killer with twenty-three deaths to his discredit, whose trail from Montana to the Panhandle was black muck spotted with crimson.

Purdy dismounted from his piebald under the three cottonwoods composing Mesquite's plaza. He dropped the reins and looked over the one-story adobe houses and stores, drab gray against the dark green of the mesquite stretching miles on each side. He reset his big hat on bristly hair, shoved his blue denim shirt deeper into his trousers and, with a shake and pull, readjusted his chaps.

Wiping his hand over a stubby mustache, he spat into the *acequia*. Then again leaned over the muddy trickle of water, but not to spit. It was to reassure himself that his unwinking eyes had seen what they had seen. He whistled to himself.

"A perfectly good six-gun, muzzle down in the mud! An', if that ain't blood soakin' the sand there, then I never seen blood."

He straightened with his hands on big guns. His eyes met those of a man who sat with his back against a cottonwood.

The man had been gazing curiously at Purdy. Curiosity ordinarily was as good as a death warrant.

He turned his eyes quickly away.

But the man's curiosity and uneasiness were a sop to the killer's vanity. Amiably he asked: "Shootin' match?" indicating the crimson spot and the gun.

"Yeah. Right good 'un. Starns, the town marshal, killed his pal. It was a accident, but he throwed his gun away. Says he'll never kill again. Me, if I throwed my gun away, I wouldn't stay here."

AT the first sentences Purdy started as though a shot aimed at random had hit him. The last gave him an opportunity to ask casually:

"Bad town?"

"You ain't heard of it? You ain't heard of Mesquite?"

It was a question and an exclamation, indicating that either Purdy's education or veracity was at fault.

"That street is the main street in hell. Looks quiet right now, but wait till a wagon train comes in. Town lives off'n 'em, 'cause they pass through goin' in four directions. Let a train come in, an' I dunno if the saloons or the graveyard does the most business. Starns had it quieted down some, but hell oughta pop now."

A breath of relief escaped the killer. He remembered Starns very well, for the marshal had broadcast that Mesquite was the one town in the Panhandle where Purdy dared not come. Pride had forced the killer to accept the challenge. He had not relished the duel, preferring to catch his victims unawares—and had been uneasy as he rode in.

But his confidence suddenly flooded back. There was in all Mesquite no one now, to match guns with him!

"An' Starns throwed his gun away, huh?" Purdy's voice was soft and caressing—the deadly softness of a killer creeping on a victim. "Know who I am? I'm Gil Purdy. The man Starns said had better not come here. It looks kinda funny t' me that Starns swore never to kill another man an' throwed away his gun the very day I come to town. Know what I think?"

The other did not answer. He was paralyzed in mind and muscle. Purdy, who fed his vanity on other men's fear, was complimented sufficiently to answer his own question:

"I think he's scared of me."

The man's staring eyes and dumb tongue expressed that he, certainly, was afraid. This was Purdy, who had started as a hired gunman in a range war and then succumbed to blood lust. Purdy, who had boasted he'd kill so many men that no one ever would equal the record. Purdy, who boasted he never would be arrested. Purdy, who always struck first. Purdy's eyes were snake-like now, cold, unwinking, as he said:

"I come to town a purpose. An' that purpose was to kill Starns."

AT that moment three men came out of a house and crossed to the plaza.

One paced with his hands clenched at his sides and his head down. He wore a black vest, and black trousers outside his boots. When he lifted his head to speak, his big hat, set well back, showed sandy hair over a freckled face with determined lips and wide-set eyes. He gave the im-

ssion of great strength, although he was ordinary build. It was an inner power of the spirit, greater than any strength of sinew.

Beside him a white-haired man—tall and firm of step—gestured as he talked. The third man merely listened to what was apparently a futile argument. The dust rose under their feet and settled behind them as they came to the cottonwoods.

"Until you came, Starns," the arguer was saying, "Mesquite had more graves than houses. A man couldn't step outside the door and be sure he'd go back in alive. The three men ahead of you, that were brave enough to take the job of marshal, were dead almost as they pinned on their badges. Then you came, and the decent element began to have a chance. Let the bad men hear what you've done, and they'll come in like buzzards to a carcass! It all depends on you, Starns."

"Judge, I know you got the town's interests at heart," said the sandy-haired young man. "I know I was lucky enough to live and clean up the town."

"Lucky? You were smart!"

"Maybe. But I'm through. Understand? Through today. My gun stays in the mud. Sooner or later a man gets too quick on the draw. What that stage driver did was nothin' to shoot over. If I hadn't been carryin' a gun—my buddy, that I've pal'd with for years—"

He swung his head in dumb agony at the memory. . . . He had got into an argument with a drunken stage driver. His friend had tried to stop it and, just as the guns came out, had stepped between them. . . . One gun roared; Starns' gun. His pal dropped dead. Starns' hands clenched until the nails dug into the palms. "May I die where I stand if I ever kill another man!" Starns had sworn.

The three stopped talking as Purdy swaggered toward them, accoutrements jingling. He halted, feet apart, hands on his sides within snatching distance of his guns. A mocking smile curled the thick lips under his mustache. From long habit, he watched the other's face and hands, although the marshal's holster was empty. That emptiness bolstered his bravado immensely.

"I hear tell you throwed your gun away, Starns. You was wise. . . . 'Cause I'm Gil Purdy. I'll run this town from now on!"

The air crackled between the two men. If Starns changed color slightly, it was not from fear. It was from remembering he had warned Purdy to stay away from Mesquite. Here was the killer, baiting and deserving death. But he had sworn an oath never to kill again. And he was a man of his word.

THE killer's mind was as narrow-tracked as a barbed wire fence. He feared Starns. Therefore, he reasoned, Starns must be afraid of him. More so, since he had lost his nerve and thrown away his gun.

He should be easy prey, if Purdy could only make him reach for a gun. Purdy had not done away with twenty-three men by being a stickler for etiquette. But he did insist that the other man be armed and going for the weapon.

"You was a helltootin' marshal while you was up against the easy ones," he said tauntingly. Insult was the way to start things! "That mouth of yours run off like the Rio Grande, tellin' what you was goin' to do to Purdy. Well, Purdy's here! Too bad you throwed away your gun just as he was ridin' in. Too bad, an' also suspicious!"

The marshal went white under the freckles. His hand opened and closed, tingling, for the feel of a gun-butt. But he had lost his self-control once that morning. He'd not lose it again. He thought hard before answering, and then his speech came slowly:

"I could kill you, Purdy, where you stand. Or I could shoot the gun out of your hand." His words quickened, grew louder. *"Draw, you snake!"*

The marshal's left hand flashed toward the man beside him, and whipped the gun from its holster.

Purdy worked automatically when he saw the judge's gun come out to flip from left hand to right. Surprise made Purdy a fraction of breath too slow.

As his own gun cleared the holster, the .44 crashed.

Purdy went whirling like a top. He stumbled—recovered. But his own gun was gone. So was the fleshy part of his thumb. Roaring curses, he wrapped a

handkerchief around his hand to stop the gushing blood.

Starns returned the gun to its owner with no hint of victory. He was sternly calm.

"You see what I could do if I liked. I could have killed you as easily. Better get out, and stay out!"

The killer's thick lips curled to spit out a stream of vile invectives.

"You're smart at shootin' a gun outa a man's hand. But lemme tell you. That gun'll come back to that hand. And when it does, look out! I'll cut me a swath in Mesquite as wide as hell! You'll be the last one I come for. An' you wanta have a gun in your hand!"

He crossed to the Mesquite hotel and bar, pushing through the dozen Mexicans and Americans cluttering the door, demanding a doctor. There was no doctor, but he was directed to the bartender who carried a stock of remedies.

"You see how it is, Starns," said the Judge. "A killer knows only two kinds of men. Those who are afraid of him, and those who aren't. If you're afraid, better ride right now."

"Afraid? Me, afraid? Say, how much have I got to stand in one day?"

The Judge repented. "I know you're not afraid. I know you did that to prove to him you're quicker on the draw than he. But that won't stop him. No good scotching a snake. You've got to kill him —or be killed."

Starns' hands closed over his belt in a tight, determined grip, his eyes showing steel. Then Starns looked down at the fast-drying blood spot on the sand.

"I'll never kill another man," he said through set teeth.

"Killers need to be met with death!"

"I'll never kill another man!" Starns muttered over again.

WHILE Gil Purdy's hand healed, events moved in Mesquite as they would if the town had been atop an active volcano.

The residents ate their beans and *tortillas,* bathed in the *acequia,* drank *sotol* or Three Star according to their nationality, and gambled away the same dollars they had won the day before. They carried on their ordinary lives, but everyone of them acted as though each day was to his last on earth.

Purdy spent his time putting fear into their hearts. Mornings, he was sober. At night, roaring drunk. Dangerous always, with his left hand continually crooked to snatch the gun as though he were afraid of being slow.

And he let it be known that he was almost as fast with his left as his right. Almost as fast—for Purdy—meant he was faster than any in Mesquite—except Starns.

In the bar, he stood with a foot on the rail and a hand on the gun. In the street, he stayed close to the adobe buildings, eying suspiciously every man who slunk hurriedly past. Having once been fixed with his unwinking eyes, they avoided him.

His tally of dead, with the look in his peculiar eyes, established fear of him. Fear was his stock in trade. It fed his vanity. To see a Mexican hunch over and slink past—to see an American duck suddenly around a corner—exalted him to the skies.

So was prepared the way for the reign of terror that was to come, so soon as his hand got well.

"Gil Purdy's goin' to put his brand on Mesquite," he told himself, smacking his thick lips.

Purdy went into the bar, ordered a drink while he thought things over. The bar had a dirt floor and a brass rail, a few small tables, a large one, and a roulette wheel. A streak of sunlight from the door showed it empty except for the fawning bartender and a lean young man eating a late breakfast. Purdy stood in the shelter of the end of the bar.

"Goin' to be emperor of Mesquite! An', just like all emperors, I'll wade in blood!" The thought burned and intoxicated like the whiskey going down his throat. Gil Purdy's reign of terror in Mesquite would be heard of from coast to coast. Killers there had been. Bad men there always would be. But Gil Purdy was determined to give 'em all something to aim at. Something they could aim at but never quite hit.

In the course of that reign of terror, he hoped to goad Starns into a gun fight. For the marshal had cut painfully into Purdy's pride. If, at thought of Starns' speed on the draw, Purdy grew cold, he warmed himself with thoughts of the speedy ones among the late twenty-three.

Purdy lingered with pleasing memory. . . . Where were they now? Toes up. . . . Starns wasn't so fast; he had pulled from another man's holster, when Purdy had counted on him being gunless. Starns had got the break. At heart, he was likely scared of the killer.

PURDY poured himself another drink. He balanced the glass in his bandaged right hand, resting a foot on the rail, left hand on his gun. As he drank, he eyed the lean young man eating alone. Purdy saw he was dusty, with tired lines under his eyes, as though he had ridden far.

"Stranger?" asked Purdy.

The dusty one broke the yolk of the third fried egg over an *enchilada.*

"Yup. . . . Hear tell the marshal hereabouts throwed away his gun when he shot his pal by mistake. Crazy galoot. Pal wouldn't hold it agin him. Anyways, I thought mebbe I could hold down his job. Killers is about cleaned out, I reckon."

Purdy set his glass down, hitching his trousers with the good hand. Hiding the wound, he crossed to the table. He leaned on it, fixing the stranger with his cold eyes, nearly suffocating him with his liquor-laden breath. When the other's eyes slowly widened in apprehension and wonder, the killer asked maliciously:

"Ever hear of Gil Purdy that's shot more men than this room'll hold?"

The color left the stranger's face, giving him an empty, useless look. He nodded, uncertainly.

"I'm him!" announced Purdy, his lips pressed together, a smile of pride tugging at the corners.

He straightened up, swaggered to the bar. There he leaned, back to the bar, one heel hooked in the rail—watching.

The dusty one finished breakfast, then rolled and smoked a cigaret. Without looking at Purdy he paid, went out to the corral. He mounted and, without a backward look, loped gently out of town.

Purdy laughed aloud. Roared and whooped. Knocked his hat to the back of his head and swaggered out the door, laughing.

The laugh died as he met Starns face to face.

Starns did not dodge, or try to get past, as other men did. He met Purdy's snake-like look with wide, interested eyes. The marshal's black hat was cocked over one eye, thumbs and forefingers in the pockets of his black vest.

Purdy flashed a look at his holster. It was empty. The stone that had risen in Purdy's chest dropped to become his heart again. He wasn't scared of Starns, who had thrown his gun away. Starns must be scared of him.

"My thumb's about well," Purdy said grimly.

"Yeah?"

The word held a balanced scorn that made Purdy rage.

PURDY snatched at control again. He went on in a low, ominous tone.

"When it gits well, you an' me's goin' to have a settlin'. You said I'd better not come to Mesquite. I'm here. Now you're gonna kill me, or I'm gonna kill you."

"I'll never kill another man," replied Starns steadily. "But you won't kill me, either!"

Purdy started back. Not quite certain of the other's meaning, nor able to read his look, he snorted and stomped away around the corner.

The Judge, who had heard the conversation from the store, came out.

"Starns," he begged earnestly, "you'd better forget this foolishness about not carrying a gun. That man's working himself up to where he'll stage a one-man riot. Nobody but you can stop it. Why don't you stop it before it begins?"

"I swore I'd never kill another man. An oath's an oath."

"I respect that but—" He was interrupted by a crash of shots.

Both turned and ran toward the sound. On the other side of the building, Purdy stood in a cloud of dust kicked up by a dying Mexican. The street otherwise was deserted.

Purdy, holding the gun in the crook of his arm, reloaded.

"He pulled a knife on me," said Purdy.

The Judge bent over the Mexican, who now was quiet. The hilt of a knife protruded from his waistband.

The Mexican might have pulled it part way. Or, his death struggles might have worked it out.

The Judge stood up, gesturing to indi-

cate his helplessness. Purdy went off by himself, watching them over his shoulder until he rounded the corner.

Then the Judge whirled on Starns.

"The man's a rattlesnake. He's got to be rid of. Now! If you don't do it, I'll try—and I'm old and slow with a gun. I wouldn't stand a chance, but I'm man enough to take that chance!"

"Don't do it! Don't! And don't rub it in on me. Can't you see what a hole I'm in?" groaned Starns. "I warned him away from here. He came the same day I killed my pal, after I'd sworn never to kill or carry a gun. He thinks I'm scared of him. I ain't. But I won't go back on my oath. I'll never kill again!" A little silence, then Starns muttered thoughtfully:

"There oughta be some way to settle with him."

"You don't settle things with a killer. You kill him, or he kills you."

"I'll never kill another man," Starns repeated.

BEFORE Purdy's thumb had healed, a wagon train came in. When the train moved out, it carried the news that Purdy had come to Mesquite. Carried the news that the man who cleaned up Mesquite had thrown away his gun, and never would kill again.

Gunmen who had left Mesquite in the middle of the night, rode back in the glare of noon. They came back, partly to sneer at the marshal who had run them out, and partly to get their share of the money the lull had brought to town.

Besides, there was a chance that Purdy would force Starns to a fight. Meanwhile, the gunmen trod softly. None but Purdy dared to bait the marshal.

The Judge sensed the things these gunmen thought, though they held their lips tight.

He ambled around, stopping by groups that gathered in the bar and in the streets —watching.

Among them, Purdy walked, king of the herd. The Judge saw the looks that followed the killer. Side glances from lowered eyes. Back glances over shoulders. Looks over the tops of tipped-up liquor glasses. They told of the queer conclusion their twisted minds had come to.

"Strange! They all want the honor of killin' Purdy, and think they can do it," the Judge told himself. "But, none o 'em want to stackle Starns. If Starns would get rid of Purdy, they'd all leave town. But let Purdy back Starns down, and the battle will be on. And heaven help the law-abiding citizen who gets in the way!"

The gunmen were like buzzards in their gathering. Buzzards who wait for other prey to make the kill.

Purdy's thumb got well. The piece gone out of it interfered with his technique, but not for long. Day after day he practiced until he could flip out the gun, and fire with the flashing certainty of a snake darting his ugly head out of a cactus. Those who saw blinked their eyes, and swallowed hard. Then the wagon train came again to Mesquite, bringing many more to swell the big audience Purdy's vanity demanded.

"He'll stage his riot tonight," said the Judge to Starns. "He's worked himself up to a frenzy. After the first killing he'll run amuck. The blood of these men'll be on your head. Only you can stop him."

"An oath's an oath," Starns answered doggedly. "I may be sorry. I am sorry, now. But I'll stick with it. They've said I was yellow. Said I was scared of Purdy. Now you say I'm a murderer. But an oath's an oath!"

"You're certainly a man of your word," said the Judge bitingly. In his heart, he admired the other's honor; his ability to keep his word in the face of taunts. But, when he thought of the men who would die because of it, he grew heartsick. Still, he could not see how the marshal could keep his word and yet protect them.

"They'll have to do for themselves."

PURDY started festivities at the Mesquite bar late that night. He swaggered in, his face red and swollen from much liquor, his eyes coldly certain. Swaying a little, he surveyed the line of wagon men along the bar.

In the rear, a roulette wheel clicked. The banker's sonorous: *"Negro—Colorado"* rose above the talking and the shuffle of feet. At one table, two Mexicans twanged guitars, and sang plaintively. Mexican and American alike sat at the poker tables, cigaret smoke hazy over them.

Purdy drew a deep breath of the liquored

The room became taut as a guitar string. Every man continued to do what he had been doing—automatically, with one eye on the gunman.

To the group around the large poker table, Purdy went, both hands on his guns.

"This table's mine. Back away from it, gents, and don't none of you reach for your guns," he snarled.

They leaned back in their chairs with never a finger gesturing toward a hip. Purdy swept the money into a pile; began to gather it in. Abruptly, he looked up.

A young Mexican had gripped a bottle by the neck, and was about to swing it. It was brave, but foolhardy. It might have worked, except that Purdy did not actually care about the money. He wanted murder and plenty of it! Grabbing for the money would start things.

"Drop it, you greaser!" Purdy roared and, hard on the heels of his words, his guns flamed in twin thunders. One bullet shattered the bottle in the Mexican's hand. The other left the boy in a heap on the dirt floor. Smoke drifted away on the thick air.

When the echoes were gone, silence held the room—silence so intense the burning of the oil lamps was a hissing noise. Purdy made a sound, a cross between a breath of relief and a grunting laugh.

"Don't stop me! Don't nobody try to stop me!"

He saw a movement in the corner where it was dark. As a snake's head darts out one side of the cactus, and then the other, Purdy turned from the boy to fire into the corner. The dark corner flamed, too. There was but a fraction of an instant's difference in the gun roars. That fraction of an instant meant the difference between life and death.

And it was the man in the corner who was flung out, face down.

"There ain't nobody can stop me!" shrieked Purdy. He had started—true to the Judge's warning—on his one man riot.

HE backed to the bar, crouched, and began to fire at the oil lamps up on their brackets. One after another they went out, mingling a smell of oil and burning wick with the powder smoke. The gun crashes rang against shattering glass; flamed red in the dark that settled over the bar.

Some men, close to the door, had crept out while Purdy was occupied at the poker table. Now, in the darkness, there came a general exodus. They crowded the door, each trying to crash out. They stomped and pushed and grunted and cursed aloud. To Purdy they formed a thick, black target in the starlight.

Purdy, yowling and whooping, fired into them. A few tried to squeeze out despite the hot lead that lashed them. Others dodged down behind tables, whipped out their own guns and went to it.

With his guns emptied, and the others beginning to chatter, Purdy ran 'round the bar-end, throwing in new lead as he went.

A rattle of shoes thudded into the bar where Purdy had just been.

"Yah!" he yowled, derisively, as he fired at the flashes. Firing at flashes is not a deadly accurate business out of doors. But, in a room small as the Mesquite saloon, he was bound to hit something. Purdy ran back and forth along the bar, protected by the extra heavy woodfront, put there to protect the bartender. The killer darted out at one side, now at the other. Again, he fired over the top. His gun flashes were elusive, while those others blazed from the same spots again and again.

Heavily prepared for the battle with double cartridge belts, Purdy loaded and fired and loaded again. His shots rattled against table tops like the devil's dice boxes, rolling "sevens." Luck played his rotten game.

"Ha, you can't stop me! You can't stop Killer Purdy!" he shouted, crazed with blood-lust. A long string of Mexican curses burnt from his lips to the tune of bullets singing from his guns. "Yah, got another! Listen to him kick!"

The small room became a madhouse, a bedlam of crashing guns and hammering slugs, filled with screams and the clattering heels of men kicking out their lives against the adobe wall.

Purdy's nostrils quivered. He drank deep of victorious battle, and howled to the leap of the gun in each hand.

One by one, the gun flames went out. Their thunder died to the crash of his guns. When the last slug had thudded in, Purdy crouched in the lee of the bar, breathing

hard, the guns moving up and down in time to his breathing.

There was no other sound in the room. Outside, he could hear men running. The killer thought he sensed a movement in the dark, and his gun roared. The bullet thudded into the wall.

He knew then he had heard nothing. He had won the battle thus far. It was time to carry the reign of terror to the town.

THE heat of battle, and its excitement, had drained some of the liquor's effect from him. He felt along the bottles until he found one the proper shape, then tipped it to his lips and gulped.

With the fire within him freshly stoked, Purdy filled his guns, and went reeling for the door. When he got there, his brain was a writhing thing of white-hot fire.

The street lay quiet in the starlight. A foreboding quietness, hiding a town of terror, a town of trembling men, with ears pressed to barred doors.

Down the street the killer reeled, yowling and firing into every nook and cranny. Now and then, a cry told of a bullet that found a door crack. At every scream, the killer laughed and swaggered and brandished the guns overhead.

On the crest of his blood-lust he rode to new heights of reeling madness. He called off the names of the men he was going to kill, with the order in which he would kill them. He shouted for Starns to come out and fight.

"Come out, you yella-livered pup! You said I didn't dare come! Here I am!"

Inside a house, the Judge asked:

"Is it breaking an oath to shoot the head off a rattler?"

Starns suddenly leaped to his feet, his eyes flashing the steel of determination. He stepped to the door, called loud and clear:

"Purdy! Gil Purdy!"

Purdy stopped dead still. Triumph trickled into his heated brain. He knew who had called.

He had forced Starns to meet him at last. Every man within listening distance had heard the call above the killer's yells and the clatter of his guns. In the sudden quiet, a few of them dared peek out.

Purdy stood in the middle of the street, with uncertainty in his drunken swaying.

"A gun," said the Judge, pushing his [illegible] into Starns' hand.

"Don't need a gun," said Starns, shaking his head.

Killer and lawman met in the doorway. Starns, bareheaded, his face grim and determined, stood with a hand on one hip and the other high up on the door-jamb. Lithe and clean, he reminded the Judge of something fine and clean.

Starns was cool, self-controlled, alert. Fearless, a dead shot, quick to act on the side of the law, yet stubborn to the point of going through mental hell to abide by an oath.

GIL PURDY, facing him, was something noxious on the clean desert wind. Foul as the liquor and bloodstains smearing his clothes, dirty as his powder-soiled guns, he appeared to Starns.

"I warned you away from Mesquite," Starns said, as one who states facts. "And you came. I threw away my gun. Loan me a gun, Gil Purdy. We'll shoot it out! Shoot it out in the street! In front of everybody! In front of the whole town!"

For the space of a breath, Purdy was quiet, the words spinning in his reeling brain. Then the idea caught his notoriety-loving mind.

Here was a chance to kill Starns in front of an audience.

Purdy started to say, "Yes," then bit it off. Cautious. Ever cautious. Starns might win out.

Purdy was drunk and knew it. The marshal was cold sober. What if Starns were quicker on the draw? What if—Then Purdy laughed silently. He had a trick of his own. A trick gained in killing those twenty-three.

There was one way to be sure of winnin'. Give Starns an empty gun!

"Where'll we stand?" Purdy asked.

Arrangements were soon made. Lights flickered on in two houses. The duelers would stand, back to back, at even distances between the houses. At a signal they were to start walking at even pace. Beneath the lights, they were to whirl and fire. An equal chance for each; each with an equally good target under a light.

Starns waited, with back turned. Purdy shoved the empty gun at him as he swung around, his back to Starns' back. He heard

light thump as it went into the marshal's holster, despite his liquor-dulled senses.

Purdy's lips were dry. He licked them with a cottony tongue.

"Now," said the marshal, abruptly.

Purdy stepped out quickly despite his numbed limbs—half-afraid he would not get away from the spot. Behind him, the marshal's feet thumped steadily. Purdy's own were weights, the drop of one pulling the other up, the whole machine-like act sending him forward. Forward to the splash of light.

In the shadows, a man cursed. Another whimpered like a frightened pup.

Of a sudden, all the uncertainty Purdy ever had felt, swept in on him. Always before, his battles had been draw-and-fire. No pacing off like this. And, within himself, he had feared, always a little. Afraid he might not be able to kill this stubborn fool of a marshal. And now the liquor was getting him, too.

And here was the light. It came out in a mellow splash. Yet, in the light, his confidence returned. Everything was all right, he told himself. All right.

Wasn't Starns' gun empty? All Purdy need do was whirl on his heel, draw and fire. He had Starns licked, he thought as he whirled. Licked forty ways from the jack!

As a scream rends the night, so Purdy's brain was rent that instant. For he whirled in a gunman's crouch, with his hand driving down to his holster. Driving down to his gun. But no gun was there!

Empty! A demon shrieked in his ear: "Empty!" Damn the liquor that had driven his senses dumb!

In the other splash of light crouched Starns, *two* guns in his hands. Purdy knew, now that it was too late, what had happened. As the marshal had taken the gun from the Judge's holster that first day, so he had taken the gun from Purdy's holster when they stood back-to-back.

The killer knew in that moment the fullness of horror. He saw Starns' finger tighten on the trigger. His ears were filled with a thundering as of hundreds of hoofs. He could feel his knees giving way under him.

Hands clawing at thin air, Purdy tried to scream. Though his purple face was distorted, only a rasp of horrible sound came out of his terror-clogged throat.

Then he heard a gun-roar, and saw a flash. Saw hell opening to receive him. Not the flash, nor the roar of the gun in the marshal's hand. But the roar and flash of a storm of blood, flooding his brain through the dam that fear had broken.

Starns stood limp, looking down at Purdy's body.

"Reckon I killed him as surely as if I shot him. A clot of blood. . . ."

"You didn't kill him," said the Judge. "He scared himself to death. I'd call it suicide."

"I'd like to think of it that way, Judge," said the marshal. "Yes, I'm takin' your verdict. But, Judge, I do no more gunnin' in Mesquite!"

"You don't have to," answered the Judge.

Through the night air came the *clop-clop* of a horse's hoofs, riding north. And the hoof sounds of another, going westward. Fear was speeding along the buzzards of death away from Mesquite.

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RAMROD OF THE RIO

By WALT COBURN

Gray-faced gunslingers in Mallory's card palace muttered "Quartrell!" And out of the bandit bosque came a wraith with a borrowed name—to buck the blood-mad Border King's five-ace play!

"QUARTRELL!" The bandit's name was on the lips of every man and woman in the White Owl. Even the poker chips seemed to click the name as long-fingered dealers, their nerves rubbed raw from waiting, absently paid off small bets to the ever shifting crowd that jumped at every unusual sound.

"Quartrell!" The high-pitched voices of the dance-hall girls held a note of hysteria as the sinister name passed their painted lips. And the stringed instruments of the Mexican orchestra seemed to catch the name and pass it on to the motley crowd in the hall.

"Quartrell!" Monte Mallory, proprietor of the White Owl, glanced at the big clock above the back bar and his thin lips bared in a twisted smile. Slender of figure, quietly garbed in black, Mallory could have passed in the city for a business man and a man of peaceful nature.

More than one admiring glance followed the slender form of the gambler as he moved from one table to the next. The peons crossed themselves as he passed for rumor had it that he bore a charmed life.

Those among the crowd whose enmity Mallory had incurred watched that lean jawed, parchment-colored face for the first sign of weakening and exchanged low whispered comments as they noticed that the gambler's right hand never strayed far from the pearl-handled automatic in the shoulder holster beneath that black coat.

The fastest gunman in the Southwest, was Monte Mallory. Beneath his quiet, unruffled demeanor lay a nature as deadly cruel and merciless as a rattlesnake's. More than one luckless man had lost his all to Mallory and, goaded to desperation, had sought to recoup his lost fortune at the point of a gun. Always the result had been the same. A bullet between the eyes and the twisted smile on Monte Mallory's thin face as the gambler blew the smoke from his gun barrel.

Of Quartrell, men knew much—and little. A thousand rumors had cloaked this bandit leader with a romantic personality

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was often too absurd to be taken seriously. A swaggering, swashbuckling outlaw whose home was that ragged range of hills below the Mexican border. Friend of the poor, defender of the oppressed, leader of half a dozen unsuccessful revolutions. Elusive as a fox, descending like a thunderbolt, vanishing like mist before the sun, fighting, running, returning to taunt his pursuers, he played his game of hide and seek. His followers, ragged, unkempt, but well armed and splendidly mounted, rode at his back.

Ten miles south of the international border, the White Owl basked in the shadow of a high mesa. Formerly a cattle ranch, it had been converted into a gambling den. Monte Mallory had won the ranch in a poker game and those who knew claimed that a good portion of his winnings went to stock the ranch with white-faced cattle. His *vaqueros* were a hard riding, hard fighting lot, recruited from the worst element that existed along the border. Outlaws from the States, renegades from the Chihuahua and Sonora country, they fought and stole for their employer and squandered their wages across the bar and poker tables at the White Owl.

MALLORY frowned at the slow-moving hands of the clock and turned to a bearded man who followed him about.

"Looks like friend Quartrell was going to disappoint us, Alby," he said in a tone that expressed annoyance. "Ten minutes to midnight and no sign of him."

"He'll show, all right," grinned Nick Alby. "That greaser was too scared to lie. He said Quartrell had bin fixin' fer a week to make a clean-up at the Owl. The night's young, Boss."

"See any strangers in here?"

"Only one that I can't figger out. The big feller that's bin playin' faro all evenin'." Alby turned to point out the man in question, then frowned in a puzzled manner.

"Don't see him ndw. Dunno where he coulda gone to. That's queer. He was at the faro table not five minutes ago."

"You mean that young cow puncher with the torn jumper?"

"Yeah. Know who he is?"

"Never saw him till tonight. Some gent on the dodge, most likely. Had money on him or did have when he sat into the game. Mebbyso he's gone broke and cleared out. Nothing to worry about. Anybody else here that looks wrong?"

"Nary a one, Boss. I'd like tuh know where that cow puncher disappeared to. Got your money planted, Monte?"

"In the safe under my office floor. And five men in the office to guard it."

"Quartrell will find the Owl poor pickin's, eh?" grinned Alby evilly.

"Good or bad, he'll never live long enough to count his loot. I'm gettin' that hombre when he steps in the door." Mallory touched the pearl-handled automatic.

Unseen by any of the throng in the gambling house, a man had slipped through the crowd and mounted the narrow stairway that led to the balcony overlooking the place. This balcony was partitioned off into rooms where one could sit and watch the crowd below, sheltered by heavy burlap curtains.

The man who cautiously mounted the stairway was a tall, well-muscled youth of perhaps thirty, his smooth-shaven face bronzed by sun and wind. Nick Alby would have recognized him as the cow puncher who had been bucking the faro lay-out.

HE gained the top of the stairs, glanced over his shoulder to make sure he was not followed, then slipped into one of the rooms and softly closed the door behind him. For a moment he stood in the semi-darkness of the curtained room, peering about. Then he sank to a crouch, a short-barreled .45 in his hand.

A faint rustling sound came from a corner. Then the stifled sob of a woman. The man was across the room in one catlike bound, bending over the huddled figure.

The woman shrank from his touch. A faint cry of fear escaped from her tight lips as she struggled to her feet.

"Don't. . . . Please don't touch me!" she begged. "I'll go now. I've seen what I came here to see. You'll let me go now, won't you?"

"I reckon I'm kinda dumb, ma'am," grinned the man, "but I don't quite get yore drift."

"Oh!" The girl shrank back against the curtain, letting in a narrow shaft of yellow light. The light revealed a slender

slip of a girl, clad in a well-tailored but service-worn riding-habit. Her dark bobbed hair and tanned face gave her a boyish appearance.

"Why, you aren't the man who let me in here!" she whispered.

"No, ma'am, reckon not." The man's voice was soft and drawling. "Please step away from that curtain, will yuh, lady? That's the idee. Much obliged. Now if you'll kinda set down in that chair by the table and keep plumb quiet, you'll be safe."

The girl silently obeyed.

"Don't you belong here, ma'am? No, I reckon yuh don't," he answered his own question. "What brings a girl like you to the White Owl?"

"If you are one of Monte Mallory's men, perhaps you can guess what brings the sister of Rodney Moore to this den of thieves." There was anger and scorn in the girl's voice.

"Not bein' one of Mallory's coyotes, I have to own up that I don't know Rodney Moore from Adam."

"You aren't in Mallory's employ?"

"Hardly." The man laughed shortly, his eyes hard as flint.

The girl pulled the curtain a few inches to one side. "Look!"

The man, followed the direction indicated by her small brown hand, frowned and nodded his head.

"That drunken kid in the dude ridin' pants?" he whispered. "Is that yore brother?"

The girl nodded wearily and let the curtain drop into place.

"Rod's been here almost a week, drinking and gambling. How much he's lost, I dare not think."

"He was givin' I.O.U.'s to the faro dealer. Said he'd about come to the end of the rope."

"I was afraid so. Mallory has had his eye on our ranch for a long time. Rod's only twenty and this merciless gambler has pulled the wool over his eyes. Rod even had him come to the ranch for a visit. He wanted me to treat Mallory nicely. We quarreled about it and Rod came back here with him."

The man choked back the curse that came to his lips. He had watched young Moore being robbed by the nimble-fingered dealers and had seen drink after drink being brought up to the boy as he play

"You'd better slip down the stairs a outside, ma'am," he told her. "Things shore goin' to tighten down below in a few minutes. I'll git that kid brother uh yours outa here when I finish what I have to do."

"What do you mean?" asked the girl.

"The White Owl is about to be held up."

"Held up? By whom?"

"Quartrell!"

"How do you know?"

"Because I. . . . Too late to run for it now, ma'am. Hear them horses outside? Duck behind this curtain. The minute you see a chance, slip down those stairs and outside. Get yore horse and hit for home in a run. Yore brother'll meet yuh there."

"How can I tell—"

A volley of shots cut short her speech. Shouted orders, the tinkle of shattered glass, the scream of a frightened woman, all punctuated by the staccato popping of guns.

A score of rifle barrels covered the assemblage from the broken windows. So far, not a man of the attacking force had showed himself.

The man in the balcony slipped a black silk mask over his face and drew his gun.

"Mind what I told yuh, Miss. Promise?"

"I promise. I'll go as soon as I can. But what—"

"Good! See yuh later. Don't worry about the kid brother. Adios."

He stepped to the curtain and peered at the scene below.

DIRECTLY beneath the balcony stood Monte Mallory, gun in hand, his eyes fixed on the door. An overturned table sheltered him from view of anyone coming in the door.

Beside the gambler was Nick Alby, his bewhiskered face set and grim as he fondled his gun.

Standing erect, the man in the balcony jerked aside the curtain. One leg over the balcony he paused, for a second, then dropped. A crash as he fell on top of Mallory. The gambler, stunned by the terrific impact, lay quiet. His gun spun across the floor.

Nick Alby, recovering from his surprise, swung his gun.

The man who sat astride Mallory fired,

shot tearing the .45 from the hand of gambler's henchman.

Monte Mallory, dazed and bruised, was jerked to his feet and propelled toward the office. A well-placed kick from the cow puncher's boot shattered the lock on the door. Using the bewildered gambler's form as a shield, the man stepped into the office.

Five guards gasped in unison, then dropped their guns and held up their hands.

"The first crooked move outa ary one of you gents and I send this polecat of a Mallory to his Maker. Step out into the big room where my men can keep yuh covered." He herded them outside and swung the door closed, bracing it with a heavy chair.

"Now, Mr. Monte Mallory," he drawled as he shook the gambler like a terrier shakes a rat, "open that safe under the floor, and make it fast. I'm in a hurry!"

"Give me a gun and fight fair," snarled Mallory. "I'll kill you like a snake. Are you Quartrell?"

The other man laughed softly. Then, his left hand, still grasping the gambler by his coat lapels, tore at the immaculate white shirt. A ripping sound and the white fabric gave way. Beneath the linen shirt was a breastplate of chained mail.

"Mallory, the hombre with the charmed life. Where'd yuh git the tin shirt, mister? Bullet proof, eh? Well, let me tell yuh somethin', pardner. When I go gunnin' for yore scalp that iron shirt ain't goin' to help yuh none. Why? Because I'm goin' to shoot yuh between the horns, sabe? Now open that safe."

Snarling like an animal, wincing under the calloused palm of the other man as it slapped him about, Mallory obeyed. The door of the safe swung open.

"Never mind the money, Mallory. What I want is the deed to this ranch. Fork it over."

"The deed to the ranch? Are you crazy?"

"Perhaps. Hand it over. Pronto. Now give me all the I.O.U.'s given to you by this Rodney Moore kid."

"But what—" The rest of the protest died unspoken as the hold-up man's hand caught him squarely in the mouth. Cursing beneath his breath, the gambler handed over the deed to the ranch and the notes given him by young Moore.

The man pocketed the papers and prodded the gambler with his gun.

"You stole this ranch and that kid's money with yore crooked cards. I'm takin' 'em back with a good honest gun. I'm givin' this ranch to the man it rightfully belongs to—the son of the man you won it from with a marked deck. The money you stole from Moore goes back by the same route. I want you to move yore cattle off this range and vacate the White Owl within two weeks. If you don't, I'm comin' to get yuh and get yuh right, mister polecat."

Still holding the squirming gambler in his steel-like grasp, he kicked open the door and stepped into the gambling hall.

"I'm killin' Mallory the second I see ary sign of gun play!" he called as he shoved the gambler across the length of the hall. "My men are backin' my play."

RODNEY MOORE, white to the lips and somewhat sobered, stood with his hands raised in the air. The hold-up man and his cursing prisoner halted beside the youth.

"Git yore horse and pull out, Moore," he snapped. "Pronto!"

He accompanied the command with a jab of his .45 and Moore lost no time in obeying.

Edging to the door, the cowpuncher halted. Then he pushed Mallory forward on his face, whirled and sprang out the door. A horse stood by the building. A second and he was in the saddle, surrounded by a dozen riders. More riders appeared as if by magic and the cavalcade got under way. A clatter of hoofs, the creak of saddle leather and the tinkle of spurs, and the White Owl was left behind.

"Congratulations, Dave Carson," laughed a tall, bearded man who spurred his horse alongside the mount of the hold-up man.

The puncher turned in his saddle, pulling off the black mask. Half smiling, but with a puzzled frown puckering his brows, he looked sharply at the bearded man.

"Hmm. I don't remember *yore* face, pardner. Hang me if I remember hirin' *you.*

"That was a neat job, young man," the bearded man went on, ignoring implied question of the hold-up man. *"As neat a job as Quartrell himself could have done."*

Like chaff blown before the wind, the other riders had scattered into the hills, leaving these two alone.

"Say, who are you that knows the name of Dave Carson?"

The bearded man smiled. "No need of pulling that gun you have your hand on, friend. You and I have no quarrel."

"Who are you?"

The bearded man bowed slightly in his saddle. *"I am John Quartrell!"* He whirled his horse and was gone.

II

"ANOTHER fool blunder like you made last night and I'll kill you, Alby." Monte Mallory's voice was cold with hate. The green eyes under his bruised brows stared fixedly at his employee.

"How was I to know that the lyin' greaser was planted where my men 'ud find him? How was I to know that it was not Quartrell that was stickin' up the joint?" Nick Alby looked up from his bandaged hand to find himself gazing into the black hole of Mallory's automatic.

"That'll be about all the noise I want out of you this evening, Alby. I pay you to carry out orders, not make excuses. Spill me the whole yarn once more, just as you got it from the bartender at Caliente."

"I rides into Caliente, careless like, savvy. Sayin' nothin', actin' quiet and unconcerned. Before I opens my head, this bartender shoves me a drink.

" 'I hear the White Owl was stuck up list night,' he grins at me. 'Stuck up by a bunch uh kids and greasers that couldn't hit the side of a mountain with a gun.'

" 'Yore tellin' me that Quartrell's men can't shoot?' I fires back at him, hot under the collar.

" 'Quartrell?' laughs he. 'Who said anything about Quartrell? It was a cow puncher and a bunch uh boys he picked off the streets of Caliente. They gets five bucks apiece to bust the windows uh the White Owl and shoot at the ceilin' a few times while this bald-faced cow hand makes a monkey uh Monte Mallory. They all come back to town and got lickered up to celebrate.'

" 'I reckon yuh got it wrong,' I tells him. 'One uh my boys picks up a greaser day before yesterday. This greaser is uh Quartrell's men. He tells me, un pressure, that Quartrell plans to stick t the White Owl that night.'

" 'The greaser was planted where you'd find him,' laughs the bar-dog. 'Go back and tell Monte he's the laughin' stock uh Caliente.' "

Monte Mallory sprang to his feet, his lean face working with pent-up emotion. Alby watched him fearfully. He breathed a sigh of relief when the gambler lit a cigarette and sank into a chair, staring with brooding eyes at the floor.

"Yuh mind that cow puncher I was tellin' yuh about last night, Monte? The gent that faded from sight jest afore the play come up?"

Mallory nodded without looking up.

"He had on a blue jumper that was tore down the back. The gent that fell outa the balcony on top uh you had on that same torn jumper."

Mallory looked up with a scowl.

"Think you'd know him if you saw him again, Alby?" he growled.

"Shore thing. But he's plumb vanished. Why do yuh reckon he wanted to stick up the White Owl? Yuh say he never touched the cash."

"Remember the night in El Paso when I fleeced a cow man named Carson out of a twenty-thousand-acre ranch and all the stock he had on it?"

"I ain't likely to fergit it. The Carson gent committed suicide when he sobered up. We left town with the cops crowdin' us clost."

"Exactly. Well, unless I'm badly mistaken, the gent with the torn jumper is Carson's son."

"How come yuh got that idee, Monte?"

"Because, when he left, he took the deed to the ranch with him. And he had the nerve to tell me to get my stock off this range and pull out of here within two weeks."

Alby whistled softly. "Well, I'll be dog-goned. What d'yuh aim to do about it, Monte?"

"Do? I'll tromp him out like I'd tromp a snake. And you're going to help me."

"We gotta locate him afore we start trompin', Monte."

"That's your job. Watch the Moore ranch. He made me hand over the Moore

I.O.U.'s last night. He must a friend of Rodney Moore's."

"Or a friend uh his sister," leered Alby.

In a flash Mallory was astride Alby, his long white fingers wrapped about the man's throat.

"You lie, you dog!" The long fingers tightened. Mallory's green eyes watched the darkening, distorted face of the struggling Alby. Then, when the man's breath came in horrible, whistling gasps, the gambler's fingers relaxed and he stood back to watch the man recover his reeling senses.

Nick Alby, gasping and twitching, slowly regained his faculties. Fear and hatred mingled in the glance that he shot the unruffled gambler, who sat in his chair inhaling clouds of blue smoke and blowing them ceilingward. Without a word, Alby got to his feet.

"I let you off easy because I need you, Alby," sneered Mallory. "Marion Moore is going to belong to me, sabe? And I don't want her name to cross your dirty lips again. Now get out and locate young Carson."

Nick Alby paused at the bar to gulp down a huge drink of mescal that burned like fire as it passed down his bruised throat. Then he got his horse and rode alone into the night. Resentment and hatred toward the gambler darkened his bearded face. Muttering and cursing to himself, he headed his horse for the Moore ranch.

AT about the same hour that Nick Alby rode away from the White Owl, Dave Carson drew rein at the Moore ranch.

Marion Moore, her riding-habit replaced by a white dress that was sadly out of style, appeared at the entrance to the patio.

Hat in hand, Dave swung from his horse and approached the white-clad figure.

"I figured on getting here last night, Miss Moore," he began, "but I couldn't make it."

"I suppose Rod and I have been placed under obligation to you," she replied, her voice cool and devoid of emotion. "You will come in?"

"Not if you feel that way about it, ma'am. I stopped by to give you these." He held out several slips of paper to her.

"Rodney's notes to Mr. Mallory," she said as she examined them. "Part of your —er—loot, I suppose. I thank you for your efforts in our behalf, Mister Quartrell, but Rod will pay his so-called debts of honor. I shall return the notes to Mr. Mallory."

"Suit yourself, ma'am. Monte Mallory robbed your brother. I robbed Mallory. Odds even, seems to me. Of the two methods used, I'm inclined to think that mine is the more honorable."

Marion Moore eyed Dave curiously. What manner of man was this who could drop the idiomatic slang of the range for the correct grammar of the educated man? Even his manner seemed to change. Garbed as he was in weatherbeaten, shabby jumper and chaps, he held himself with an aloofness that hinted of the poise of a man of culture.

"It seems that I have been harboring a mistaken idea. Plainly, I am intruding. I'm sorry." He bowed stiffly and turned to his horse.

"What's the row, Sis?" called a youthful voice and Rodney Moore, clad in immaculate flannels, appeared behind his sister.

"Mr. Quartrell has returned your I.O.U.'s, Rod," she replied coldly.

"White of him, I'll say. Awfully decent." He took the bits of paper and tore them to bits.

"Rod!"

"Don't get ritzy, Sis. Monte gypped me while I had a skin full of hooch. I'm off that baby like a soiled shirt. Gee, Sis, you should have seen the Quartrell chap take it out of Monte! It was—"

"Rod!" The girl's voice was sharp and her cheeks crimson with humiliation.

"All right, all right. Get upstage if you want to. But I'm tellin' the dizzy world that it was one swell show. If you'd been there and could have seen it for yourself, you'd—"

"It so happens that I was there," she cut in coldly.

"You! In the White Owl?" Rodney Moore went a bit white.

"And this man helped me get out of the vile place. I saw the whole performance. I don't know which is more disgusting, Rod, your puppylike dissipation or the high-handed, lawless actions of Mr. Quartrell."

"Just a moment, Miss Moore. You've

been calling me Quartrell. I'll have to correct you. My name is Carson—Dave Carson."

"Oh! Another robber of Quartrell's type. After all, the name counts for little. Carson or Quartrell. Your last evening's work should have netted you a fortune, Mister Carson. Monte Mallory is reputed to be quite wealthy."

Dave, hot with resentment and wincing under the girl's scornful accusations, dismounted stiffly and approached her. Erect, his blue eyes blazing, he faced her.

"I got from Mallory what was rightfully mine, ma'am. Five years ago, while I was overseas fighting, this same Mallory, preying on the weakness of a man whose life had been shattered by the false report that his son had been killed, stole the ranch where the White Owl now flourishes. My father killed himself when his brain had cleared. Last night I got back the deed to that ranch. I came there to get it and I succeeded. Incidentally I recovered your brother's notes which Mallory had stolen by the same method that he had robbed my father. I came to Mexico to break Monte Mallory. If my method of attack is disgusting to you, I regret it a lot. But that does not keep me from carrying on. Good night."

Before the girl had recovered her wits, Dave was gone. As the hoofbeats of his horse faded in the distance, Marion Moore turned to her brother. Tears dimmed her eyes and she swayed dizzily. Rod held her for some moments, comforting her as best he could.

"Buck up, Sis. Don't blame the chap for getting chesty. You landed on him with all four feet, you know. He'll come back for more punishment or I read the signs wrong. There was more than mere friendship in the looks he aimed in your direction. Be yourself, Sis, and treat the guy decently the next time he shows up. Didn't he bring back my kale? I'd hope to tell you he did. And I'm poolin' my bets that he knocks Mallory for a row of ash cans. I'm through with Monte, honest I am. I'll settle down to work and—"

"You'll pay that gambler what you owe him, Rodney Moore. Notes or no notes. Be a man and play the game squarely. I've enough money to buy two tickets to Boston. You'll go back to an office. I'll get a position teaching music. We do[illegible] long here in the West."

There was a weary droop to the g[illegible] shoulders as she re-entered the patio.

III

IT was the instinctive caution of the hunted that prompted Nick Alby to forsake the beaten trail for those less open. Twisting, turning, dodging the raking catclaw limbs, he followed a winding course that brought him gradually closer to the Moore ranch.

Only once did he halt. That was when he slipped from his horse and with drawn gun watched Dave Carson ride slowly along the trail. Dave, wrapped in brooding thought, did not notice the twitching ears of his horse as he rode toward his lonely camp in the hills. Alby let him go by, then he mounted and with less caution than he had hitherto shown, kept on toward his destination.

As he rode on in the moonlight, he evolved a plan whereby he could even the score with Monte Mallory and Dave Carson.

Marion Moore would be at the ranch, unprotected save for her weakling of a brother, who did not count. What could be simpler than to swoop down on the ranch, abduct the girl, and carry her into the remote fastness of the hills? Nick Alby knew those hills better than any man save, perhaps, Quartrell. Monte Mallory feared Quartrell's power too much to follow. The gambler's infatuation for the girl would net her abductor a fat ransom if he played it cleverly. And if the worst came to pass, and Quartrell discovered his hiding place, Alby felt certain that he could enlist the aid of the bandit in helping to fleece Mallory. As for this Dave Carson, Alby dismissed him with a shrug. Carson was without a following. A dose of hot lead would be that gentleman's reward if he had the temerity to follow. Alby grinned evilly as he spurred his horse to a trot.

Save for a light in the patio, the Moore ranch was in darkness when Alby, leaving his horse hidden in the brush, crept cautiously toward the adobe building. Removing chaps and spurs, so that he made no sound, he slipped along the patio wall, keeping well in the shadow. A covert

told him that his presence was as undiscovered. Inside the patio, the girl sat beside a half-packed trunk, gazing into space with unseeing eyes.

Nick Alby, in the act of entering the patio, halted in his tracks and shrank back into the shadow.

"BETTER come to bed, Sis." Rodney Moore had suddenly appeared in a doorway that led to the patio.

"I'll come after a while, Rod. I've a few more things to pack."

There was profound contrition in Rodney Moore's face as he crossed over and placed an arm about the shoulders of his sister.

"I've been an awful pup, Sis," he said feelingly. "I've drank and gambled away nearly all the money dad left us when he died. It will take what few cattle we have and all our land to pay Monte Mallory. It's mighty unfair to you to have to pay for my idiocy and I'm going to do everything in my power to make up to you for what I've done. I've learned my lesson. I'm through acting the fool."

The girl smiled up at him through her tears.

"We'll go back to Boston, and begin all over, Rod. We should never have come to Mexico in the first place. It would simply be prolonging the inevitable stay. We know nothing of the cattle business. Rustlers would steal us blind. The ways of the West are not our ways. This Dave Carson is the only decent man we've met and he's a thief."

Marion Moore's last assertion was far from being self-convinced. After a moment of silence she again spoke.

"Rod, do you believe his story is an honest one?"

"Carson's, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I think he's as honest and square as they make 'em, Sis. Mallory is the worst sort of crook. There is little law this side of the border. Carson fights in the open like a man. He claims only what is rightfully his. I hope he wins."

"And so do I, Rod. I'm sorry I spoke as I did to him. It was unfair and catty of me. I hope he'll—"

She broke off suddenly in her speech to stare at Nick Alby, who had stepped into the patio and with drawn gun stood leering down at her.

"Nice evenin', eh, folks?" he grinned. "Nice moonlight night. A shore purty night fer a ride."

"What do you want here, Alby?" asked Rodney, advancing a step.

"I want that purty sister uh yourn to go fer a ride, young 'un."

The next second Rod sprang at the big man. A glancing blow struck Alby in the mouth, drawing blood.

Unarmed and lighter by fifty pounds, Rodney Moore stood little chance against the other man. Time after time he rushed, only to be beaten to his knees by the sneering, gun-wielding Alby, who swung his .45 with practiced accuracy against the boy's face.

White-faced, trembling with fear, Marion sprang at the bearded bully. His open hand caught her across the face, sending her backward. Her head struck against the tiled floor of the patio and she lay still.

Rod, crazed with anger, rushed again. Alby's gun crashed against the boy's skull and he dropped in his tracks.

Gathering the unconscious girl roughly in his arms, Alby left the patio. A few minutes later he rode away with her slung like a sack of grain across his saddle.

IV

DAVE CARSON, squatted beside his camp fire, reached for his gun as the thud of horses' hoofs told him he had visitors. Backing into the shadow, he awaited the approach of the men.

"Don't shoot, Carson," called a hearty voice and the next minute a giant of a man stepped into the firelight. Despite the heavy growth of red whiskers that blurred the outline of his face, it was apparent that the man was grinning widely. He peered comically into the shadows as he stood beside the fire.

"Come outa that brush and tell a man howdy, yuh young wildcat," he called banteringly.

"Sorrel Simms!" cried Dave as he leaped from the brush to grasp the big man's hand.

"Ole Sorrel hisse'f, son. The same as used to be wagon boss fer yore daddy. And I brung four uh the ole Box C cow hands

with me. Come on, fellers, the young 'un's done took his hand off his gun."

Four cowpunchers, bearded and somewhat ragged as to appearance, joined the two men at the fire. Dave, overcome with emotion, shook hands effusively.

"And now," he grinned when the excitement of the reunion had subsided, "will yuh tell me what yuh boys are doin' here and how yuh located me?"

"Well," grinned Sorrel, "we was jest ridin' the ridges, pickin' up a few head uh Box C cattle and mebbyso a brandin' of a few slick ears afore Mallory's rustlers claimed 'em."

"You mean there are still Box C cattle running loose on this range? My dad's cattle?"

"They're your'n, now, Dave. Nice bunch, too. We're rangin' 'em across the Gila River in the timber country. Mallory ain't got ary claim to the Box C stock, son. All he got in that poker game was the land. So me'n the boys gathered yore stuff and leased some range to run 'em on."

"You boys did that for me?" asked Dave, a mist dimming his eyes as he looked at the ragged crew.

"Why not? Word come that you was still alive and would be comin' back home. We'd all worked fer the Box C so danged long that we'd plumb fergot how to burn ary other brand on a critter. So we took the remuda, gathered the stuff, and drifted. We come back here occasional to take a look at the ole ranch and whup a few uh these guntotin' cow thieves that rides these hills that us boys calls home."

"I got the ranch back, Sorrel," said Dave. "At least I took the deed away from Monte Mallory. There's no man-made law in this country or in Texas that will make me give it up. Mallory stole that ranch. I stole it back."

"So we done heerd," grinned Sorrel. "That's how come we located yore camp."

SORREL grinned again. "Yuh mind the feller with the pointed beard that rode a ways with yuh after yuh left the White Owl?"

"Quartrell?"

"John Quartrell. Him and no other. His trail and ours crosses frequent. He told us how you'd stole his thunder, as the sayin' goes, and whupped Monte Mallory in his own backyard. Man, I'd 'a' year's pay to uh seen it!"

"Who is this man Quartrell?

"Who is John Quartrell? There's a thousand men in this man's country that's a-askin' that same question. Mallory and his kind will tell yuh that Quartrell is the cold-bloodedest, rip-snortin' outlaw in Mexico. Other Americans down here, honest ranchers that's bin choused aroun' by bandits fer years, will tell yuh that if it wa'nt fer John Quartrell and his men they'd quit the country. He's the man that's saved them ranchers from ruin and death, Dave. He's a outlaw, mebbyso, but he's made this country safe fer honest folks to live in. I've seen some queer happenin's in these hills the past five years. And we'll see more afore long."

"What do yuh mean, Sorrel?"

"There's new storehouses at the Box C ranch. Storehouses plumb chock-full uh grub and guns. And a hundred miles west, in the minin' country, is hundreds uh peons workin' half shifts in the mines and puttin' in four hours a day drillin' with rifles and machine-guns. Beyond the mines, in the mesquite country, men is buyin' cavalry hosses. There's somethin' big a-brewin', Dave. Monte Mallory has a hand in it. So has Quartrell."

"Revolution?"

"Jest that. She may not pop fer six months. The show might come off tonight. *Quien sabe?* Monte Mallory sits back in his White Owl a-layin' low. Quartrell rides the ridges and watches Mallory. There'll be *poco* plenty blood spilt when Mallory makes a break. Boy, yuh shore played in luck the other night when yuh impersonated Quartrell and got away alive. Let's load yore pack hosses and hit the trail. Me'n the boys is camped over on Cibicu Crick, twenty miles to the south. The boys'll take keer uh yore outfit. Me'n you'll take a different route."

"Why can't we all ride together, Sorrel?" asked Dave, somehow sensing that the big puncher was concealing something.

"Me'n you has to pick up a lady on our way."

"A lady? What do you mean?"

"There's a tenderfoot gal and her dang fool of a brother that's squattin' right in the middle uh this here country. God help 'em, Davy, if they're in the road when

Mallory and Quartrell lock horns. I be like a feller on foot tryin' to step between two fightin' bulls. Mallory's had his eye on this here Moore girl fer some time. It's only fear uh Quartrell that has made the snake keep his hands off her. I promised Quartrell we'd git her outa range."

"That promise may turn out to be a hard one to keep," put in Dave grimly. "The girl has a will of her own."

"Persactly, Dave. And that's where yore college education comes in handy. You kin put it to her in the right way. She might be leary about a gallivantin' rooster like me, but I reckon she'll take a chanct if she knows yo're comin' along."

"Hmm," smiled Dave bitterly. "Meb-by. But don't bet heavy on it, Sorrel. She called me a thief and treated me like a coyote the last time I tried to explain something to her." Briefly, Dave told of his meeting with Marion Moore.

Sorrel chuckled to himself. "Now ain't that jest like a female woman? Dad gum it, son, we gotta git her outa this country tonight if we have tuh hogtie 'er and load 'er on a pack hoss. That fool brother uh her'n kin lead the hoss."

Together Dave and Sorrel rode in silence toward the Moore ranch.

"There's a light burnin' in the patio, Dave." Sorrel grinned at the younger man. "Better git yore hoggin' string ready."

"I'd rather take a lickin' than tackle this job," muttered Dave as they drew rein and swung to the ground.

In the doorway of the patio both men halted abruptly. Rodney Moore, blood-stained and pale, was crawling feebly to his feet, eying them through half-closed eyes.

"Carson! Thank God you've come!" he croaked as he tottered toward them.

WHILE Dave and Sorrel bathed the boy's wounds and got him in condition to travel, Rod Moore jerkily told his story.

Dave and the big cow puncher listened, silent save for an occasional half-audible curse.

"Nick Alby, eh?" growled Sorrel. "The drunken houn'. In some ways he's lower down than even Monte Mallory. He'll head fer his old stompin' ground south uh Cibicu Crick, Dave. He knows them hills better'n most men. A few hours earlier and he'd a-run slap-dab into Quartrell's men. But not now. He's got a clear track plumb to Cibicu. Feel well enough to sit a hoss, Moore?"

"I'll hope to tell you!"

"Then let's git goin'. Alby's got some start, but he can't travel as fast as we kin."

The big puncher started toward the doorway, then froze in his tracks. From outside came the clatter of hard-ridden horses and the next moment the three men in the patio heard the voice of Monte Mallory shout an order.

"We're trapped," growled Sorrel. "Mallory's done found our hosses, Dave. Inside the house! Pronto! We'll dope out a plan while we're pumpin' lead into Mallory's greasers."

The three men ran toward the small door that led to the main building. Sorrel Simms, the last one to enter, turned to fire over his shoulder into the mob of men that swarmed into the patio.

A dozen shots spattered the adobe wall. Sorrel muttered a low curse as he sank to the floor, shot through the leg. Dave jerked the big puncher aside and swung the door closed as Rod slipped the thick wooden bar into place.

From outside came shouted orders, shots, and the tramp of feet.

"Hurt bad, Sorrel?" asked Dave as he bent over the wounded man.

"Nothin' serious, son. But it'll keep me here in this danged house for a spell."

The doors barred, young Moore and Dave found rifles and moved along the dark walls to fire through the portholes built into the wall by the old Mexican who had once owned the place.

Firing, reloading, waiting, they held Mallory's men at bay. Over in a secluded corner, Sorrel bandaged his leg and then slipped along the floor to a porthole.

Bullets shattered the windows as they thudded against the thick walls.

"They're wastin' a heap uh good ammunition, Dave," whispered Sorrel. "Mallory's give orders to shoot high, so's they won't hit the lady they think is in here. That's lucky. Keep poppin' at 'em, boys, I'm goin' to take a look around. Old Pedro Gonzales built this place and twice that I

know of he slipped clean away when rurales was sure they had him cooped up. Ever notice ary trapdoors around in the floors, Moore?"

"In the fireplace," called Rod softly, his voice trembling with excitement. "Scrape away the ashes. Loose bricks there. Hole underneath. I thought it was a place to dump the dead ashes, but perhaps it's a tunnel."

Sorrel grunted his approval and gaining the fireplace, commenced prying under the cold ashes at the adobe bricks underneath. A few minutes of panting labor and he gave a low cry of satisfaction.

"Bet a month's pay I got it, boys," he called softly. "Hole big enough to crawl through. We're shore in luck. Davy, it's up to you to get through these buzzards and hit Alby's trail. Me'n young Moore'll hold these coyotes off while you make a get-away."

"I'm not going to quit you like that, Sorrel," protested Dave. "Why can't we all get away?"

"In the first place, there's no need of it. Me'n the kid kin hold off half uh Mexico here. Second place, I ain't fit to ride and neither is Moore. We'd jest git caught and mebby git you caught with us. Here we're safe as if we was in church. Grub, water, ca'tridges. No, Dave, you gotta hit the trail alone. Head fer the Cibicu, bearin' to the right uh the highest peak yuh see. There's a cabin there and like as not that cabin is where Alby's headin' fer. So-long, son. Good-luck." He grasped Dave's hand firmly.

From far away came the sound of heavy rifle fire. Sorrel grinned in the darkness.

"Quartrell's opened the jack-pot! The big show's on, Dave. He'll send men here when he finds out that Mallory's not at the White Owl. Ride like the devil hisse'f was chasin' yuh, Davy."

Rod Moore laid a hand on Dave's shoulder.

"Good luck, Carson," he said hoarsely. "I know without your saying so that you think a lot of Marion. Take good care of her, old man. And if we don't meet again, tell her I did my best to make up for my past mistakes."

"You bet I will, Rodney." Dave grasped the boy's hand, then slid from sight into the tunnel that led he knew not where.

THE narrow hole of the tunn
inky black. The air was damp
musty. Some places the earth had ca
in and Dave had to dig with his hands t
make a passage large enough to wriggle through. The going was painfully slow and seconds seemed hours to the man who sweated and crawled and blindly groped his way. He paused for breath, scraping moldly earth from the open collar of his shirt. Suddenly he grew tense. Somewhere ahead in the darkness he had heard a scraping sound and a breath of fresh air smote him in the face. Again came the scraping sound and this time it sounded closer. Then the weak flame of a lighted match flared up, guttered, and went out. A man was coming along the passage toward him! Dave's right hand crept toward the holster under his armpit. He stifled the low exclamation that surged to his lips as his hand came away from his empty scabbard. Somewhere along that stygian passageway, he had lost his gun!

A muttered curse from the darkness ahead told him that the man was coming closer. Dave breathed a silent prayer, hoping against hope that the man would not light another match. Crouched on all fours, his cramped quarters hindering any freedom of movement, he awaited the man who came slowly on.

But a few feet now separated them. Dave could hear the man's labored breathing. Pressing his legs against the walls of the narrow pasage, Dave braced himself. A scant two feet in front of him, the man stopped. Dave could hear him fumbling for a match. A scratching sound as the match scraped against the man's denim jumper. A pale, sputtering flare! Then Dave lurched forward, his hands seeking the other man's throat!

The blinding flash of a gun, its report muffled oddly, yet with deafening impact. Dave felt a hot, tearing pain in his shoulder. Then he grasped the hand that held the gun and his teeth sank into the thick wrist. A grunt of pain and the gun dropped, buried under a shower of earth that fell on the struggling men. Choking, sputtering, gasping for breath, they fought in silence, each tearing at the other's throat. Loosened dirt from the low ceiling gave way, half burying them as they struggled. The smell of powder was thick in the foul

Dave felt oddly dizzy and his ears throbbed and rang from effect of the blood and the rank air. Then a pair of hands, thick and powerful, closed about his bare throat and he felt his senses slipping. Summoning every ounce of strength left in his body, he pulled his knees under him and lurched forward, throwing an arm about the neck of the man, seeking a strangle hold.

A great clod of earth, loosened by the impact of the struggling men, fell with a thud. Buried beneath the smothering, stifling avalanche, Dave loosened his hold and made a last effort to crawl free of the cave-in. Dimly aware that the fingers about his throat had slipped free, he crawled over the motionless body and dully crept onward. Behind him, buried beneath the mound of loose earth, his late antagonist lay motionless.

IN reality it was but a few seconds, but to Dave it seemed hours later when he mounted a short ladder at the outer end of the tunnel and drew in great gulps of the crisp, fresh air. He was in a small clearing surrounded by brush. From the other side of the brush came the sound of voices and the restless tramping of horses. Crawling under a mesquite bush, Dave lay quiet, recovering his strength and listening to the men. From their talk, he knew them to be Mexicans.

"Juan should be coming back soon," growled one in an impatient tone. "He said he would be back as soon as he found if the tunnel was still open. He is a slow one, that Juan."

"Perhaps the tunnel has caved in on him," put in the second Mexican as he squatted on the ground holding the bridle-reins of several horses.

"Perhaps. It would be my luck to have it turn out that way. He owes me money, that Juan. And he was wearing a shirt that belongs to me. Always it is my luck to have things turn out that way. But perhaps it is better that he should die before he owed me more. A brother-in-law like Juan is not so good."

"Well do I know that," agreed the other. "Listen! What was that?"

"A quail moving in the brush, perhaps. Juan would make more noise than that. I wish he would come. The Señor Mallory will soon be back here to learn if the tunnel is still open. If Juan does not show up, one of us will have to go into the hole. I'm going to take a look."

Dave, hugging the shadow, saw a squat-built peon cross the clearing and peer into the open. The man got down on all fours and called into the black hole.

Dave, grasping a heavy stick that lay near, slipped to his feet. A quick leap and he was astride the bewildered peon. The club descended with a dull crack and the Mexican went limp.

It was the work of a moment to disarm the man and pitch him into the hole. Then Dave crossed the clearing, skirted the brush clump, and boldly approached the other peon, who sat with his huge hat well over his eyes.

"What luck?" asked the guard lazily, then froze to immobility as Dave's gun poked itself into his face.

"Be quiet or I'll kill you," said Dave easily. "It does not matter to me. Up with your hands."

The peon obeyed in frightened silence. Dave disarmed him and bade him jerk the bridles off all the horses save one. With his gun to emphasize his command, Dave ordered the Mexican to lie face downward on the ground. Then taking the lariat from his saddle, he bound the frightened peon, gagged him with a neck scarf, and left him.

"You can tell Monte Mallory that the tunnel has caved in on Juan," grinned Dave as he mounted. Then he whirled his horse and rode into the night. The wound in his shoulder throbbed painfully as he twisted a rude bandage about it. Fortunately it was a flesh wound and not deep. The thought of Marion Moore and Nick Alby acted as a lash to his pain-racked body. Grim-lipped, hard-eyed, he kicked his horse to a run.

BACK at the tunnel opening Monte Mallory cut the rope that bound the Mexican and roughly kicked the luckless peon into an excited burst of eloquence.

"How many of 'em were there, you yellow dog?" snarled Mallory.

"Mebbyso three-four! *Quien sabe?* I fight hard, but they are too many. *Madre de Dios,* how I fight! No good. They are too many, Señor! Juan and Pedro

are both killed! They come through the tunnel!"

"Was there a woman with 'em?" Mallory accompanied the question with a kick.

"*Si!*" agreed the peon, too frightened to think of anything save appeasing the wrath of his commander. "*Si,* there was a woman. They took her along. The leader was Quartrell!"

With a curse, Mallory swung his gun crashing against the peon's skull. Then the gambler rode back the way he had come, calling loudly to his men to quit firing at the house and follow him. Those whose horses had been turned loose by Dave followed on foot like so many sheep. Cursing wildly at his followers, Monte Mallory spurred his horse cruelly along the twisting trail that led to Cibicu Creek.

V

DAWN found Dave, his face set and drawn, still in the saddle. Not until he reached Cibicu Creek did he dismount. The cool water was a godsend to the wounded man and he spent some time bathing the blood-caked wound in his shoulder, adjusting the bandage, and drinking his fill. He had pushed his horse to the limit and the gaunt-flanked, sweat-streaked animal stood with lowered head beside the creek.

A hundred yards from the creek crossing was a clearing where the feed was good. Here Dave staked the horse and with his saddle for a pillow, lay down to rest. Inbred caution had taught him to seek a sheltered place where he would be hidden from sight.

"Wonder how Sorrel and young Moore are makin' it?" he mused. "I hope Mallory—" He broke off in his musing to grab his gun. His keen ears had caught the sound of a horse's hoofs and the sound of voices at the crossing. Dave slipped into the brush and cautiously crept toward the sounds.

At the crossing, Nick Alby swung from his saddle and roughly jerked Marion to the ground.

The girl's clothes were torn, her face scratched from the brush, and her hands were bound to her sides.

"Better take on some water, yuh little wildcat," sneered Alby as he drank from his hat without offering the girl a drink.

She gave him a defiant glance a awkwardly knelt beside the stream buried her face in the water.

"Only fer that fool play yuh made a tryin' to get away, we'd 'a bin here a hour ago. Led me plumb off the trail with yore fool brush dodgin'. If yuh think yuh kin sit on that hoss without jumpin' off again, I'll untie yore arms. But if yuh—say, what's them rags layin' by the rock yore settin' on?"

Without waiting for her to reply, Alby stooped over and picked up the blood-stained strips of cloth that Dave had thrown aside when he dressed his wounded shoulder. Dropping the rags with a low curse, Alby's hand sought his gun. The fight at the White Owl had left Alby's gun hand bruised and stiff. He cursed now at his luck as he shifted the .45 to his left hand and peered about.

Dave, in the very act of stepping into the open, halted in his tracks. A dozen horsemen, headed by Monte Mallory, had jerked their jaded mounts to a halt, ten feet from the astonished Alby.

MALLORY, his eyes glittering with hate, eyed Alby for a moment in silence. When he spoke his voice was hoarse and unnatural.

"Thought you'd double-cross me, eh, Nick? You should have known better than to play any game like that on Monte Mallory."

The gambler's pearl-handled automatic flashed into sight, spitting fire. Alby, a surprised look on his leering face, sank slowly to the ground.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Mallory, white-lipped with fury, emptied his gun into the huddled form of the man who had turned traitor. Even when the gun was emptied he sat in his saddle, pulling the trigger.

The girl, with a cry of horror, ran toward the brush. Mallory, a crazy laugh on his thin lips, watched her go without trying to stop her. Then, reaching for a fresh clip of cartridges, he spurred his horse after her.

"Hold on, Mallory!" Dave, his voice cracking like the pop of a whiplash, crouched lower in the brush and covered the gambler.

"One foot farther and I'll drop you in your tracks! Your tin shirt won't save

Mallory, Because I'll plug you where eyebrows meet! Get off that horse keep your hands raised. If one of your men so much as makes a move, I'll shoot you."

Monte Mallory, livid with rage, obeyed slowly.

Dave, hidden in the brush and still watching Mallory, again raised his voice:

"Miss Moore! Marion! Where are you? This is Dave Carson talking."

"Here!" she replied as she fought her way through a maze of tangled brush. She was by his side in a moment.

"Hurt?" he whispered as he cut her bonds.

"Not a bit," she replied bravely. "Just awfully scared."

"Then get on Mallory's horse and hit the trail for the White Owl. Ride hard. I'll hold this gang while yuh get a start."

"But how will you get away? I won't leave you like that. I've treated you mighty badly, Dave Carson. I've been a little cat. I'm hoping you'll forgive me and let me show you I'm not the narrow-minded little beast I seemed to be. If I leave here, you'll go with me." She gripped his left hand with a pressure that quickened Dave's pulse.

"I need two horses, Mallory!" he called jubilantly. "Yours and that roan behind you. Pick another for yourself. I'm taking you back with us. Lead those horses into the brush here and make it fast."

"I will like—" Mallory ducked instinctively as a bullet missed his ear by a scant inch.

"Get those horses, yuh polecat!"

Mallory obeyed without protest. When he had led the horses to a point where they were hidden from the dazed Mexicans, who shifted uncertainly in their saddles, Dave bade Marion mount Mallory's horse.

"Tell those greasers uh yours to keep their hands off their guns, Mallory. I'm rarin' to kill yuh, and don't let that fact slip your mind for a second. Give 'em orders to toss their guns in the crick."

Dave was alongside the gambler now, poking him roughly with his .45. Mallory sullenly gave his men orders to throw their guns in the creek.

A few deft twists and Mallory's feet were lashed to the stirrups. Then Dave mounted, and leading Mallory's horse, started off.

"Fall in behind his horse and keep him movin', Marion," he told her in a low tone.

She nodded and took her place.

"I'm killin' you if we're followed, Mallory. Better tell your greasers to camp a while."

Mallory hesitated a moment, then, as he read the determined look in Dave's face, he called orders to his men not to follow.

AS they rode at a stiff trot along the trail, a crafty gleam crept into Monte Mallory's eyes. Dave was taking a course that would lead them to the spot where the gambler had left part of his men, who had orders to watch for any pursuers. These men would be hidden along the trail. Unless some unforeseen incident occurred, Dave would ride squarely into the trap.

"Mallory's horse leads easily, Miss Moore," Dave called back to the girl. "Suppose you come on up front?"

"Just waiting for the invitation, Mister Carson," laughed Marion. "Promise not to be so terribly formal and I'll do it—Dave."

"I promise—Marion," he grinned back at her.

As they rode side by side, Dave told her of the fight at the Moore ranch.

"Sorrel and Rodney are probably somewhere along the trail right now," he told her in a voice so low that Mallory could not hear. "Mallory must have called off his greasers when he found out I'd gone through the tunnel. Seems like Quartrell chose last night to drop in on Mallory at the White Owl." He turned to the prisoner.

"Your White Owl is probably burned down by now, Mallory. Too bad you didn't stay to watch it go up in smoke when Quartrell touched a match to it."

Mallory laughed shortly. "Don't be too sure about the White Owl being gone, friend. It was guarded by trained troops under the leadership of some of the best officers in Mexico. And I wouldn't be so cocksure if I were you, Carson. There's many a slip, you know. You've come off winner so far, but a man's run of luck can't last always. This is twice that you've won. I'd like to make you a bet that you're either dead or my prisoner before night. Quartrell's clever and he has the

backing of the American cow-men down here, but he's overmatched himself this time."

"What do you mean, Mallory?" asked Dave. "Quartrell backed by the cattlemen? Quartrell's an outlaw."

"Don't kid me, mister. I'm not so foolish as to grab that yarn. The men that are running this little revolution are wise to him, too. He's nipped more than one revolt while it was budding, but he let this one ripen too long. He's overplayed his hand this time."

Dave did not heed the note of triumph in the gambler's tone. Nor did he notice that there were odd sounds in the brush along the trail. Sounds of an occasional cracking twig or a dull clicking of stealthily cocked guns. Mallory's eyes, bright with excitement, swept the brush on either side of the trail. Then his lips pursed in a shrill whistle.

A split second after the gambler's signal, the trail fairly swarmed with men. Dave's gun roared and a Mexican who had grabbed the girl fell limply to the ground.

"Take 'em prisoner! Both of 'em!" shouted Mallory.

A rifle barrel thudded against Dave's skull and he toppled from his saddle.

VI

THE sobbing of a woman, Monte Mallory's flat, toneless laugh. The excited, high-pitched voice of some Mexican. And all this to the accompaniment of creaking saddle leather and clanking bit-chains. Dave sensed all these sounds before his eyes opened. Then he became conscious of the fact that he was tied to his saddle. Terrific pains darted through his head and his shoulder throbbed and ached.

"But, Señor Mallory, I tell you that Quartrell has won the fight. Two-thirds of those peons that we spent months in training deserted and took their guns with them! The White Owl is burned to the ground and all our officers are killed. Only you are left and instead of scattering into the hills, you want to lead us back there to be butchered. We are but a handful compared to Quartrell's forces."

Dave, opening his eyes, saw the khaki-clad figure of a rebel officer facing Mallory defiantly.

Mallory's thin lips twisted in a sneer as he swung in his saddle to look at the Mexican.

"Monte Mallory goes back if he has to go alone, get that? You and your men ran away from Quartrell like so many rabbits. Why? Because you're as yellow inside as you are outside, greaser! This is the way I treat yellow dogs like you!"

The morning sun glinted as it struck the blue barrel of Mallory's gun. Then came a streak of fire and the khaki-clad officer toppled from his saddle, shot through the heart.

"Ride on, you yellow-bellied dogs!" shouted Mallory, brandishing his gun. "A white man is leading you now! Follow me and you'll wipe Quartrell and his men out like they were sheep! I'll kill the first man that turns back!"

Dave, erect in his saddle now, saw the mob of awed Mexicans sullenly obey the command.

"Dave!" called a low voice at his side. He turned to see Marion, pale with fright, riding on his left. She, too, was tied in her saddle and the same peon led both their horses.

"The man has gone mad, Dave!" she whispered.

He nodded, trying to force a grin. "We'll come out all right yet, Marion."

Mallory, riding some ten feet ahead of the prisoners, turned in his saddle to call over his shoulder:

"Sorry to deprive you two of my company, but I've business up at the head of my men. Quartrell's headed this way, and I aim to give him the fight of his life. Adios, folks. If you have prayers to offer, it would be wise to pray for my success. My victory is yours. If I lose, you'll be shot before Quartrell can get here to save you. See those two handsome peons that ride behind you? They have orders to kill you if the tide turns against me."

WITH a mocking bow, Mallory turned and rode at a gallop toward the head of the men, who reluctantly advanced to meet the victorious troops of Quartrell.

The next moment the prisoners found themselves free from the ropes that bound them to their saddles. The peon

had led their horses dropped their reins and joined the other two Mexicans. One of them thrust a gun into Dave's hand.

"Quick!" hissed one of the guards. "Quick, before the Señor Mallory comes back!"

"But I don't understand?" whispered Marion.

"That officer which Mallory keel ees brave man, sabe? Long have Jose and I follow heem," said Dave's guard. "Because that captain weel not lead us to be shot down, the gringo Mallory ees murder heem. Should Jose and I obey the order of such a gringo? No! Adios, Señor! Adios, Señorita!" The two peons were gone before Dave and Marion could thank them.

"God is indeed kind, Dave," whispered Marion as they rode recklessly into the hills.

"You bet he is, dear," grinned Dave as he clasped her hand for a moment, then led the way along the twisting trail.

The sound of the fighting had increased. Dave and Marion, climbing a steep trail that led to the top of a mesa, let their horses stop for wind.

"Look!" Dave pointed to the brush dotted level below them.

Mallory's men were in full flight, spurring their horses to a run as they fled from the gradually advancing horde of men.

Suddenly a horseman spurred into the open, firing as he came.

"Monte Mallory!" gasped Dave.

The man seemed to bear a charmed life. Erect in his saddle, he rode straight at the line of hidden men who ceased firing to watch him advance to his death.

Then a second rider galloped into the clearing. A tall, black-bearded man on a huge black horse.

"Well met," called Dave softly. "The man on the black horse is Quartrell."

The firing had ceased and a deathlike silence fell over the watchers as the two men rode toward each other, their horses slacked to a walk.

Mallory's left hand tore at the bosom of his shirt and the shirt of chain mail underneath glistened in the sunlight. The gambler's face was putty white and his thin lips tightly pressed in a sneer as he raised his gun slowly to cover Quartrell.

"Shoot for the head, Quartrell!" he cried. "I'm crossing the Big Divide, but I'm taking you along!"

Two puffs of white smoke, the reports of the guns blending as one shot. Mallory seemed to stiffen in his saddle, then, as a small crimson stain in his white forehead slowly spread, he toppled to the ground.

Quartrell's left hand went to his cheek and came away, stained red from the gash where Mallory's bullet had ploughed a furrow.

Sorrel Simms was the first man to reach the dead gambler. Dismounting, he limped toward the huddled form and bent over it.

"Nobody but Monte Mallory could uh done it, John," he said in an awed tone. "Don't never let nobody say Mallory didn't die game."

Quartrell nodded. "It was a brave thing to do, Sorrel. The man really forced me to kill him."

"I don't mean that, John. Monte Mallory was as good as dead when he rode into the open. There's three bullet holes in his back. He couldn't uh lived ten minutes longer."

At that moment Rodney Moore sighted Marion and Dave as they rode down the trail from the mesa. The dead gambler was, for the time being, forgotten as Quartrell, Sorrel, and Rod rode out to meet them.

After Rodney had started for home with Marion, Dave lingered for a while before he followed them. Together with Sorrel and Quartrell, he buried Mallory where he had fallen.

"I think I know the three peons who plugged him in the back," said Dave. "They are the ones that turned Marion and me free, I bet."

Quartrell nodded. "Mallory was shrewd enough to know that when the White Owl went, his reign here was at an end. Rather than hide in the hills among the Mexicans who hated him, he chose this method of going out. A dangerous man while he lived, was Monte Mallory. There is only one thing that may be said in his favor. He died like a man."

ALONG the border there are many who will tell you that John Quartrell is a murderer and outlaw. But these are the men who follow, in a lesser manner, the

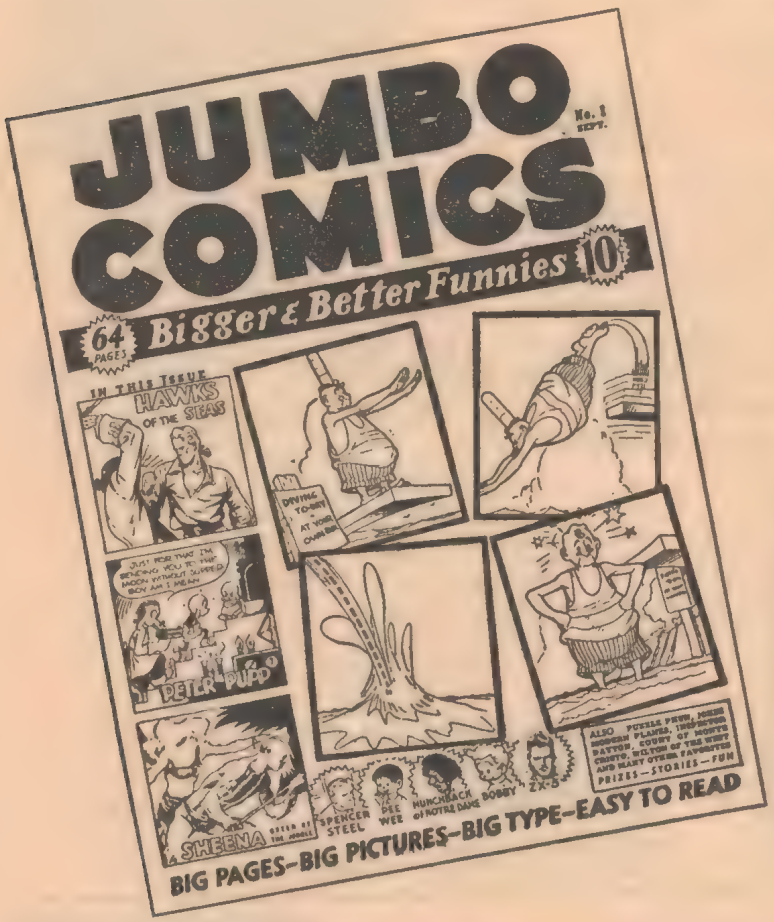
footsteps of Monte Mallory. The real men whose ranches are south of the border welcome John Quartrell as a savior. He comes and goes, sometimes by day, more often at night. No ranch but what has a spare room that is known as John Quartrell's room.

Dave Carson and Marion, his wife, have named their son Quartrell Carson.

Rodney Moore, who raises some of the best polo ponies in the country, swears by the foretop of his best mount th quit the country in a minute if he have Quartrell's protection.

As for Sorrel Simms, who has known the strange soldier of fortune since their boyhood days, well, Sorrel claims that some day Quartrell will be president of Mexico.

Thus it is that Quartrell, hated, feared, loved, respected, remains Quartrell, of whom men know much—and nothing.



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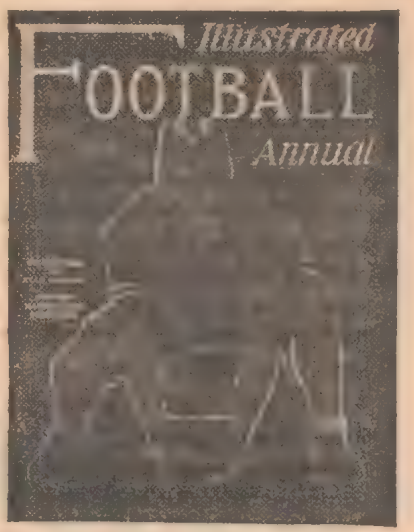

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TRAIL'S END

By 'GENE CUNNINGHAM

Mingo Daulson, king gambler of Hell-spawned Luna. No man called his crooked play—and lived—until smiling Steve Claiborn, backed by the shadow guns of a long-dead cardman, laid down his straight flush, .44 high!

STEVE CLAIBORN sat comfortably, with back to bunkhouse wall, on the Running M horse-ranch. He was splicing a brass hondo in a new three-strand manila lariat. But while his fingers were busy, so were his thoughts. Right across from the bunkhouse was the long, low and rambling adobe dwelling of the Manners —owners of the outfit. There was only one of the tribe left now, the slim, dark-haired and dark-eyed Marion, who was nineteen and rather set in her opinions and pretty as a little red wagon.

"I sort o' figger I'm just plumb in love with her," Steve was thinking. "Yes, sir: I come a-swappin' ends, tail over tincup, right *into* love with her. An' she ain't been lookin' at *me* so hateful, neither. . . .

...e she don't really mind me bein' . . . ."

...hich, the other three men of the Run-...g M would have conceded, was a lot. Ghost Maher and Cage Yancey and Sye Sumerlin were senior, in length of service, to Steve. He had drifted up only a month before and because he was good with stallions, he had been put on. It was just a stopgap job with Steve. He needed a horse and lacked the *dinero* wherewith to pay for the same. But Marion, running the ranch with the help of Ghost Maher, quickly took Steve's eye.

"Well, even if she did think a lot o' the old man—" Sye Sumerlin's voice interrupted Steve's pleasant meditations—"him hightailin' over to Luna like he done every so frequent, made him look to her like his Jawn B had ought to be bored with a couple holes for horns to stick through. Yuh know Marion's right religious. She don't hold none with gamblin' an' lickin' up the old red-eye. Her pa was a considerable trial to her. I been in this country a right smart while an' I hear about it."

"He got killed that time, didn't he?" Cage Yancey inquired. "Nine-ten month ago, wasn't it? Lost a wad o' money, too?"

"Uh-huh," nodded Sye. "He sold some fancy stuff to a Eastern buyer an' collected around six thousand, they do say. Lost it all buckin' the tiger. He was a kind o' spasmodical jigger, old Tug Manners was, 'specially after his wife died. He was skeered fit to tie o' the old lady. He would sing high Z in the prayer-meetin' for mebbe six month, then him an' the Devil'd tussle a spell an' he'd come slidin' down the pole fit to blister his paws. Git ory-eyed drunk an' gamble off his red undershirt."

"Steve, yuh stickin' after t'morrow?" Ghost Maher inquired. "Marion was wonderin'. I told her yuh was right good with the stallions an' she wants yuh to keep on—if yuh want to."

"Steve'll stick one more month, anyhow," Cage Yancey grinned maliciously. "He has got a idee, li'l' old Steven has, that because Marion kind o' acts pleasant to him he's got a good chancet to make her. Ho-oh! Don't feel bad, Steve. We all figgered like that—oncet. But yuh just keep on tryin' an' see where yuh light."

"I'm a funny hairpin," Steve drawled evenly, standing up. "I don't even *talk* so's my one hand can figger what the other's a-doin'. An', Cage, if I was tryin' to make the blamedest old woman ever yuh hear tell about, I wouldn't talk to ary other man atop the earth, about my sweatful efforts. Yuh kind o' chew down on that a spell, Cage, ol' timer, an' yuh'll mebbe add many a ring to yo' hawns. . . ."

"Is that so?" snapped Cage, hopping up like a game rooster. "Is that so? Well, any time yuh figger yuh can make me quit sayin' what I want to say, any place, yuh just come pilin' in, cowboy! I'll make yuh lots less fe-ro-cious. I'll—"

STEVE slid forward, a slim figure of middle height, yellow haired, with narrowing blue eyes. Cage shoved out his hands like a catch-as-catch-can wrestler. But a hard shoulder got over his hands. It thudded against his face and jarred him off balance. Steve's lean, brown hands twinkled. Cage swapped ends in air, with a sinewy left forearm pressing his head sideway, a right hand in the crotch jerking his feet up in unison. He lit on his head and got up furiously.

Steve sidestepped the bullrush, but shot out a hand as Cage lurched past him. He caught the knotted kerchief around Cage's neck and jerked. The cloth held and Cage left the ground. Steve jerked again, harder. Down came Cage on the back of his neck. This time, when he rolled over and charged, he was "fit to tie." He came in whining like an eager bulldog, fists doubled and circling.

Steve stepped into him and butted Cage in the nose with the crown of his head. Then he ripped both fists to the stomach; stooped and seized Cage's ankles. He lifted up, and over his head and bowed back went the Irish puncher, to plow dirt with his face. Steve turned with an expression of sweet meditation. Thoughtfully, he regarded the spitting, enraged Cage. But his mouth tightened at sight of Cage's groping hand. It was pawing an empty .45 holster. It happened that the gun was in the bunkhouse.

"Don't yuh, Cage!" he warned. "Come on an' beat hell out o' me, if yuh want to an' figger yuh can git there. But don't turn this into no gunplay."

Ghost Maher slid inside the bunk-house and reappeared before Cage had more

than regained his feet. He grinned at Steve in token that Cage's Colt was hidden. Cage went lurching blindly into the bunkhouse and came rushing back, swearing furiously. Steve looked at him calmly, then turned away. He went past the ranchhouse and turned.

Marion Manners was more than mighty easy to gaze upon. Now, as Steve Claiborn lounged in the kitchen doorway, unobserved—he believed—the slender, dark-haired girl in stiff-starched blue gingham looked like Springtime. So Steve phrased it. Certainly, she was fresh and sweet looking; short sleeves revealing rounded arms; neat ankles and small, shapely feet showing. . . . Yes, sir! Quite easy to look at, she was.

And what did all this harum-scarum rambling get a man, anyhow? Headache the next morning. Empty pockets—he had just about enough, after a month's work here, to buy that hammer-head gray outlaw.

"Why—I—" Marion turned suddenly, and if ever there lived a girl so gawky and slabsided she didn't know how to show herself to best advantage, it was long before Marion Manners' time, probably a couple generations before Eve's, too.

"Doughnuts!" breathed Steve, ecstatically. "Yuh know, doughnuts to me are just li'l round rings o' happiness, when they're made in this kitchen. By you," he added, when there was no rebuff; merely a dimpling that set him afire.

"You're just talking," she told him. "All of you punchers are alike—soul in the stomach. But, what have you been doing? *Fighting?* How did you get that scratch?"

"Fightin'? Who? Me?" Steve's tone was of amazement; vast, overwhelming. "Why, what'd I be fightin' about?"

He came inside and helped himself to a doughnut; leaned on the table and regarded her a little dizzily from this close range. *Válgame dios!* But she was good-looking. Even when she sort o' clouded up, this way.

"You fight; you gamble; I heard you tell Ghost Maher those silver conchas on your saddle were made in Vegas from Mexican dollars you'd won at *monte*. I—I shouldn't be surprised if you were a hard drinker, too."

She regarded him suspiciously. Her mouth pursed primly. It was not mouth, anyway; firm-lipped and , but the mouth of an opinionated, a determined lady. Steve ate his doug placidly. He was blind to possible faults. She waited, watching him. *He* was worth looking at, too—though it was a matter which was far from his mind.

The black "Boss" Stetson on his yellow head was new; so were blue flannel shirt and waist-overalls and well-shined shop-made half-boots. His spurs were spoke-roweled, silver-mounted McChesneys. But many a cowboy wore a much more expensive layout; Steve Claiborn, though, had a way of wearing his clothes.

"I'm sure you drink!" she snapped at him.

"Yes'm." He reached for another doughnut. "That is, I reckon yuh're shore."

"I don't want men working for the Running M who are—are *debauched!*" It was a fine, large word. But it slid off Steve Claiborn's muscular shoulders without making a ripple in his serene, tanned face. He finished his doughnut.

"Ghost ask' me a while ago if I aimed to stick, after t'morrow. . . ."

"Well? Do you? If you do—"

"Girl! Girl!" Steve said huskily. His expression had changed now, with a vengeance! "I would love to stick around forever an' the next day—with yuh. I never looked sideway at a nice girl before, but now—"

With the same twinkling of skilled hands which had been Cage Yancey's downfall, he was holding her close against him. His hat had flipped backward to the floor as he caught her. Swiftly he bent and upon the small red mouth hotly pressed his own. For an instant she was motionless, the surprise, perhaps, responsible. Then she freed herself with a violent push of both hands against him. She stepped backward and glared at him.

"Oh—you—I should have you thrown in the horse-trough!"

"For lovin' yuh?" Steve grinned. "The's some things, honey, yuh just can't stop. Love's one, I kind o' reckon. I'm just a good-for-nothin', driftin' puncher, I know. But I do love yuh! I've done that li'l thing ever since I rode up an' saw yuh. I—"

"You think that a gambling, carousing,

cowpuncher can make love to *me?* ve the brazenness to think that I'd it? Why—"

uh find them hard words sort o' easy. . . . But I do'no' as I'm down-right depraved. I have drunk some; took a fling at various kinds o' tiger. I don't claim to be no better'n most. But I do try to shoot square an'—"

"I'll pay you off now! You can saddle that crowbait you rode here on and get off my ranch. I wouldn't have you working here another day."

"Yuh shore have some high idees about what kind o' fella associat's with yo' hawses, now, don't yuh?" Steve drawled. He was watching her steadily, wide mouth tight. "I reckon nothin' short o' presidin' elders ought to ride for the Runnin' M—an' as for a foreman— *he* ought to be a Bishop."

"I saw enough of carousing, as a child. My father was like all the rest of you. At every opportunity he sneaked off to drink and gamble. Until Mingo Daulson killed him at Luna, having won six thousand dollars from him. I am not going to have—"

"Depraved, debauched gunnies around," nodded Steve. "An' when one goes so far as to tell yuh he fell in love with yuh, which I reckon, likely, was a mistake; I fell in love with what I *thought* yuh was, which is plumb different—yuh want him th'owed in the hawse-trough. About yo' father, any fool knows yuh can't hold in a hawse all time without him bustin' loose eventual.

"Yuh can pay me off. I wouldn't feel comfortable here, now. If it's all-same to yuh, I'll take that gray funeral-wagon somebody unloaded on yuh, for part pay."

"You expect to *lead* him away?" she scoffed. "Nobody has ever ridden him."

"My goodness!" he grinned sardonically. "An' me thinkin' he was a ol' buggy-hawse! But I'll take him, all-same. With me'n him both gone, Runnin' M ought to be right pure. . . ."

"He's worth your month's pay—forty dollars."

"I'll give yuh thirty-nine. That leaves me a dollar to go debauchin' around on."

SO he left the Running M. Nor did anyone at the bunkhouse open his mouth as Steve packed his few belongings in his saddlebags and rammed his Winchester .44 in the boot. But when he saddled up the roan he had been using and went out to the little pasture, to return with the evil-faced gray, Ghost Maher and Cage and Sye watched curiously.

That gray had a reputation in this country. He wore fifteen brands, all vented but the Running M. Plain indication that he was an unwanted animal, once purchased. But Steve saddled him. He knew a man's horse when he saw one. He gathered the reins and was in the kak before the gray got set. Thereafter came a siege of spur-scratching, quirt-pounding, rough-riding the like of which none of the watchers had often seen. But it ended with Steve riding the outlaw. He slipped stiffly from the saddle, gathered up his possessions and put them in place.

The tussle with the gray mankiller had burned up his rage. He looked down thoughtfully at the foreman and the two punchers.

"Don't yuh-all git too depraved an' debauched," he warned them. *"Adiós!"*

He cut the Luna trail outside the north fence and rode the twenty miles by nightfall. Casting back, he decided that it was a good thing to find out a girl's character in the beginning. She was pretty, all right. But that tight little mouth. . . . *Uh-uh! Uh-uh!* The gunie who married her had better wear out a new quirt right away, if he wanted peace and quiet and a man's life.

He paused at one end of the dusty single street of Luna. It was a curly wolf's village, he thought, looking down the two lines of saloons, stores, saloons, saloons and saloons. There were perhaps some residences, but they seemed to have sneaked off to themselves somewhere. And it was here that Tug Manners had been downed by one Mingo Daulson, whoever *he* might be.

"Un peso plato. . . . One, li'l', lonely silver dollar," Steve meditated. "What would the fortune-tellin' cards say? Ham an' eggs?—four drinks?—or a shot at the tiger where he's stripedest? Hate to lay down one dollar on a roulette table. . . . Stud might be right previous. . . ."

He came to the Buffalo Head, which unlike most other drinking places, had games in connection. He swung down and

hitched the gray. It was twilight, now. Steve looked doubtfully at the saloon's swinging doors. What to do, with only one dollar? The doors parted, but without anyone coming out. They swung back; out again; back, then out once more. And a short, wide, red-faced cowman skipped nimbly through, turned and thumbed his snub-nose mockingly at the doors.

"Haw-haw!" he said. "Fooled ye, ye dom' bushwhackers that'd sneak up behind a man an' smack him in the ear!"

He rocked on his high heels, surveying Steve with small, very round blue eyes.

"Rye whiskey! Rye whiskey! Rye whiskey! I cry.
If I don't get rye whiskey, I'll curl up an' die!
If the ocean was whiskey an' I was a duck,
I'd dive to the bottom to get one sweet suck.
But the ocean ain't whiskey an' I ain't no duck,
So I'll play Jack o' Diamonds an' try to change my luck!"

"Me son," he broke off his plaintive singing abruptly, "I will be bettin' ye that I can be hittin' me hat, five times straight, after wan evenin' o' Luna red-eye. Me last twinty to yer tin; me to be shootin' from me hip. . . ."

"What d'yuh want to be pickin' on a pore cowboy tryin' to git by, for?"

"I'll match, thin—twinty to yer tin! I must be gamblin'!"

"Mister," whined Steve, "I got jist one lonely dollar to my name. . . ."

"Me twinty ag'inst the wan, thin! Black shame it'd be, to go home wi' money in me pocket—an' I wouldn't be givin' them bloodsuckers inside another pinny!"

Steve drew out his dollar and slapped it blindly on the back of his hand. Tails. The squat Irishman slapped his twenty on his hand. Heads. He handed it over and tipped his hat solemnly to Steve. With vast dignity he waddled to the edge of the gallery and fell flat on his nose in the street. He sat up, addressing bitterly the sidewalks which, in Luna, he said, were as treacherous, as sneaking, as backhanded, as generally lowdown, as even the town's swinging doors. Steve grinned.

"Me son!" cried the cowman suddenly, stopping his tirade to waggle a finger. "If ye plan to be buckin' thot tig[illegible] —be ye careful! Be ye very [illegible] ye most ex-trremely dom' awi[illegible] They do not like to be beat in ther[illegible] the downfall o' thot innocent Tug [illegible] ners o' the Runnin' M, that he caught 'em cold-deckin' him an' spoke o' the matter —an' him wi' nawthin' but air to guard the back o' him."

STEVE nodded and turned away, frowning. So Manners had been assassinated. . . . He went inside and flung down the twenty on the long bar. There was a roulette game going in the back of the saloon. Behind the wheel stood a palid little Mexican. The *croupier* was a wizened fellow of hatchet-face. Steve, downing his whiskey, thought that the warning from the squat Irish cowman seemed more sober than drunken.

It was a hard-faced, salty-looking bunch that used the Buffalo Head saloon. Luna, one might believe, was no health resort. A fist fight broke out over a poker game. A burly plug-ugly darted over to it. He swung a blackjack upon one of the fighters and watched him crumple. Then he stooped accustomedly and jerked a Colt from the fallen one's holster. He slapped the senseless man here and there, expertly, hunting, Steve knew, for a "hide-out." When he straightened, he winked and grinned at the other battler while unloading the Colt. Steve watched him put the empty gun back.

"Uh-huh!" he said to himself. "This is shorely the place where the salt is sprinkled at! *Segur' Miguel!* Yuh mustn't git rough with house-men or friends o' the house. I'm beginnin' to think I would like to rope this tinhorn outfit an' drag it up by the roots. . . ."

He went up to stand before the Mexican at the wheel. He dropped a silver dollar on the red five. There were two or three other bets, belonging to townsmen or cowmen. The Mexican spun the wheel, watching with beady eyes the size of the bets. There was a twenty on thirteen. The wheel stopped and the Mexican sing-songed:

"Veinte negro! Black twenty!"

There was no bet nearer twenty than the twenty dollars on thirteen. Steve nodded almost imperceptibly to himself.

[illegible] this cowman for a time; [illegible]w the twenties he laid were [illegible]rs, on the wheel, of the stopping [illegible]. At last the man won one bet; [illegible]skull-faced *croupier* shoved him over twenty-nine gold pieces.

STEVE moved up to the bar. There was an itch upon him. Looking around at the hard-case fellows who were still grinning at the nearly cleaned cowman, the itch grew overwhelming. He went outside and to where the gray was standing. Men were going and coming, in and out of yellow-windowed saloons and houses where ladies' voices sounded shrilly. He moved to where the reins were knotted on the hitch-rack bar and deftly retied them in a slip-knot. Then he ducked under the rail and fished in a saddle-bag. There was a small .38 revolver, a double-action, there. It had a piece of slender, strong cord tried tightly to the trigger-guard.

He tied one end of the string to a suspender at the armhole of his jumper, then let the .38 slide down his sleeve until it rested in his right hand. He raised his arm, bending the elbow and hooking a thumb in jumper breastpocket. The .38 slid out of sight in his sleeve. He put his silver in left-hand trousers pocket and went back into the Buffalo Head. A hairless gambler, bareheaded, stood talking to a couple of salty-looking men at the bar. Carefully, he looked Steve over.

But Steve, drifting back to the roulette game, seemed the most aimless of men. His .45 Colt swung low on his right thigh; his right thumb was still hooked in the pocket of the Booger Red jumper. He was humming to himself gently. He stopped in front of the Mexican at the wheel and laid a dollar on thirteen. Then, when he had lost that, he bent a little forward and hard blue eyes bored into the Mexican's.

"I don't like to even think the's somethin' funny—a brake, for instance—on a wheel. I don't like to have them lawrs o' chance interfered with. So, hereafter, when yuh have spun the wheel, *amigo,* yuh will please step behind with yo' back to the wall. If yuh play with me nice an' sweet, we're goin' to git along just like two li'l tabbycats. If yuh don't—"

The Mexican tried to meet his gaze; to outstare him. But there was a dancing light, like fire on polished knife-blade, in Steve Claiborn's eyes. There were men up and down a wide, savage scope of country who knew the meaning of that light. The Mexican, though, interpreted it correctly. He shrugged sullenly. Then his eyes lifted and seemed to search for something up at the bar. But when Steve scattered three silver dollars on nine and eleven and fourteen, he spun the wheel and stepped back.

"*Once* colorado!" he droned. "Red eleven."

The *croupier* raked in two of the dollars and pushed out a gold twenty and eight silver dollars. Steve waited a moment, for there were some cowmen coming up beside him. They chose their numbers and he put the twenty on thirteen. It was a hunch. He looked steadily at the Mexican houseman and again the wheel spun and the Mexican backed to the wall. He did not look at Steve, even; his eyes were fixed on the bar.

"*Trece colorado!*" he singsonged. "Red thirteen." His face was masklike.

Steve grinned a little as the *croupier* added twenty-eight twenties to the one on thirteen and shoved them over expressionlessly. He had around six hundred now. But he was not one to whom money for its own sake meant anything. It was amusement he lived for; thrills of a life-and-death kind. Right here and now, making the Mexican keep his hand off the brake of a crooked wheel; taking his life in his hand in this dive—that was the sort of venture that pleased Steve to his very bones.

"What yuh playin', friend?" inquired one of the cowmen, grinning. "Dam' if I ain't trailin' yuh complete."

"Don't blame me if we both lose," Steve told him with tight return grin. "I'm playin' hunches. That's fine, yuh know—if yuh're right. . . ."

Five hundred in twenties he stacked, looked thoughtfully at the Mexican, then shoved them onto red three. For the wheel stood at thirteen. Steadily he watched the Mexican; steadily and balefully. The Mexican seemed to shrug the shoulders of his spirit. Whatever it was he sought up at the bar, Steve thought that he had not found it.

"Yeeeeeoooooow!" howled the cowman beside Steve as the wheel stopped. The Mexican stared at it. The stony calm of his features cracked. The thin lips snarled:

"Zapatazos!" he breathed. Steve, watching with thumb hook in breastpocket, thought suddenly that the houseman seemed as frightened as angry. He looked nervously up toward the bar; mechanically, still watching, he droned the official information that *tres colorado*—red three—was paying.

Steve looked down at the stacks of gold twenties being shoved across to him. Once before in his life he had won five thousand. He had seen a Chinaman win a hundred and forty thousand on thirteen. But here *he* stood with fourteen and a half in gold before him. He heard footsteps behind him; many of them. He had another hunch. He looked steadily at the *croupier*.

"Gi' me fourteen thousand in bills—thousand-dollar bills!" he said grimly.

The *croupier* hesitated, but meeting once more that impelling, oddly-lit gaze, he made the substitution. There was a gabble of excited voices around Steve's back. He turned quietly, the sheaf of bills rammed into his jumper pocket, right thumb pocket-hooked. A hairless little man was regarding him steadily. Never in his life had Steve faced eyes that so obviously held murder. . . .

"What happened?" the gambler inquired of the houseman, with icy eyes still on Steve's. "What's the excitement, Manuel?"

"He bother me while I'm spin the wheel!" the Mexican gasped. He seemed in the throes of a vast, well-founded panic. "He say—'you step back! You do these an' them!' He bother me all-time. He no win fair. Fo'teen thousand. More! Near' fifteen, he win. Because he bother me. I no can spin the wheel right."

"Couldn't use the brake, he means," nodded Steve affably. "Yuh see, I made him spin, then step back to the wall. That way, he had to le' me git the break I was entitled to. The kind o' break I wasn't s'posed to git. . . . If ever'thing was all O.K. with that wheel, he wouldn't yowl about steppin' away after spinnin'. . . ."

"He cheat!" cried the Mexican savagely.

Steve whirled at sound of that voice. It was premonitory of the flashing knife coming at him across the layout. He leaned a little backward; dropped his [illegible]. Into it smacked the butt of th[illegible] and he drove two of the wicke[illegible] dummed bullets into the Mexican's [illegible] body. Back he whirled instinctively. Half-out of the holster was the hidden gun of the little gambler. Other hard-case loungers were crowding up, beginning to recover from the shock of the sudden death.

No time to shoot. Steve whipped up a deft boot-toe and kicked the hairless one's gun out of his hand. He was over the roulette-table and darting toward the employes' door behind the wheel, before a shot could be fired. He jerked it open; halted for one split-second to slam two .38 slugs into two of the foremost housemen. Then he slammed it shut behind him and heard the *thut-thut-thut-thut* of bullets tearing into the wood as he ran, crouching, down a dark passage.

HE came out into a back yard and stopped to look about. If only he had that long-legged gray outlaw of his! He thought that few animals in this village would overtake the ugly gray. But he dared not go back around to the front. He ran softly across the yard and along the rear walls of buildings until he found a narrow space between two. Up this he fumbled to the street. Behind him he heard the savage cries of the hunters. They had either followed through that door, down that passage, or run around the building. He had unfastened the string that held the .38. He jammed the deadly hideout into a pocket, stepped out onto the street and looked toward the Buffalo Head.

There was a crowd on the front gallery. So he turned downstreet, sauntering aimlessly along, sorely tempted to choose a horse at one of the hitch-racks and go hell-for-leather away from Luna. But it seemed wise to go a little farther away from the scene of the excitement before risking that. Suddenly, before him, appeared a smallish man. Steve recognized him as one of the housemen of the Buffalo Head. He cursed the luck which found him at the moment of this meeting in front of a brilliantly lighted saloon. The fellow stopped short, gaped a moment, then raised his voice in a triumphant howl. He had a gun in his hand.

holster streaked Steve's white-
. He slammed up on the little
was perhaps a little shaky from
along the buildings' rear. He felt
mud of the other's bullet, but saw him come crashing down with his own first shot.

From the sounds that rose on the single main street, Steve thought that all Luna was after him. It is the human impulse to chase the runner—without inquiring why he runs. And certainly, for all his high heels, Steve was a runner, now. He hurdled the fallen gunman's body and raced down the street. There was a corner and from its duskiness came a vague sound:

"Oh, Molly! Oh, Molly! It's for your sake alone,
That I leave my old parents, my house an' my home.
That I leave my old parents, you've caused me to roam:
I'm a rebel soldier an' Dixie's my home—"

He darted around the corner and there, leaning against what seemed to be the closed door of a dark, deserted house, was the squat Irish cowman who had given him the opportunity to begin warming up this night. Steve stopped short, for a gun had come twinkling into the other's hand.

"I took that twenty—" Steve panted "—won some. Yuh were dam' right: they don't like a fella winnin'. I killed that Mex' at the wheel. I—"

"Be ye slippin' in behind me," grunted the Irishman instantly. Then, when Steve had slipped into the deep recess of the doorway, he leaned against the corner of it and took up his song again:

"I'll build a ca-castle on yonder mountain high.
So my true love can see me when she comes ridin' by.
I'll build me a ca-a-astle—"

"Where'd he go?" roared many voices and the Irishman pointed down a path.

"Shtring him up," he cried. "He was all over the toes o' me—th' *omadhaun!*"

"They're gone?" whispered Steve. "Well, I better be hightailin'."

"Me harse is over the way. He'll carry us double, I'm after thinkin', me son."

"No-o!" There was the daredevil flicker of eyes, curving of wide mouth, typical of Steve Claiborn. "I'm goin' back up an' git my own hawse. Hell! It's plumb safe. Ever-body's hellin' around down there."

He went quickly back to the Buffalo Head. Nobody had thought to take the gray. Steve jerked the slipknot, slid under the rail and went into the saddle without touching the horn. As he whirled the gray about, fearful that the hammer-head was going to have a tantrum, a man appeared suddenly at the cross-bar of the hitch-rack, gaped for an instant, then with an oath jerked his pistol up.

With the roar of the Colt and the slap of a bullet through the skirt of his duck jumper, Steve looked under his arm. It was that hairless little gambler and he had pulled back the hammer for a second shot. Steve turned the gray on a dime with nine cents' change. He rammed in the rowels and sent the outlaw charging the hitch-rail. No-Hair jumped back. His bullet sang wide and wild. Up went the gray, which was not according to Steve's program. Over the cross-bar and crashing to the wooden gallery floor. At his very stirrup, now, Steve found the gambler. He had no scruples whatever; he virtually jammed the muzzle of his .45 into No-Hair's ear and let go the hammer.

AROUND the corner came charging the big plug-ugly whom Steve had seen first in the Buffalo Head—he who had swung a blackjack on a cowboy from behind. He had a gun in each hand and he tried to whip them up. But Steve was coming hellbent straight at him. Over from right to left, Steve jerked the Colt-muzzle. With its thunder the big man went down—whether dead or wounded only, Steve never knew. For he was out in the street now, flat on the gray's back.

A squat figure rode out from the livery-corral at the end of the street. Steve jerked up the Colt, then lowered it. He and the squat Irishman rode out of the town of Luna together, with the gray racing a half-length ahead of the other's mount.

Miles outside of the place, they pulled up. It was bright moonlight. Steve had said never a word. But he had been thinking of the Running M; of Tug Manners and his death and his loss of six thousand which would have cleared up the mortgage

on the Running M. He looked at the Irishman. "I run that twenty up to fourteen thousand an' a half. Had to hightail leavin' the odd gold on the table. . . . I downed that Mex' at the wheel. Downed a gunman on the street. When I sneaked back to git my hawse, I like to collected it myself, from that li'l No-Hair in the Buffalo Head. But I drilled his top piece for him. . . ."

"'No-Hair!'" repeated the Irishman. "Why—why, me son! Ye don't mean ye downed thot snake, Mingo Daulson! Horraw an' four cheers! Ye downed the rat thot downed Tug Manners!"

"The hell!" cried Steve. "Then it's a sign! Will yuh do somethin' for me? Just a li'l bitsy favor? Thanks! Take this bundle o' thousand-dollar bills—six in all, the' is—out to the Runnin' M an' tell Miss Manners yuh recovered it from Daulson."

"She's a good-looker," the Irishman said thoughtfully, holding the bills. "I yer play, ye'll be takin' it there yer

"Listen!" grinned Steve. "It's I know my play that I want yuh to Not for me no wife that'd currycomb ... for singin' in the choir a-Sundays! An' she figgered she didn't want to make double-harness with me. So she run me off the ranch. But if she was to figger she *did* want to paint for matrimony, I never would git my hoofs out o' her loop. No, sir! Yuh an' me, Mister, we're sayin' fare-thee-well now. Me, I'm hightailin' where I can go *debauchin'* around whenever I want."

He whirled the gray on a side-trail and the Irishman sat staring at a cloud of dust. Faintly, to him, came the sound of an ancient song—a line of it:

"I got no use, no use, no use a-tall, for wimmin—"

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TWO-BIT BADMAN

By WALTER CLARE MARTIN

A little larnin' is a dangerous thing! When bushwacking jail-jumpers stacked the deck on his salty boss, hell-bendin' Bill Barnum fell back on his three Rs—ridin', ropin' and rat-killin'!

IF pay dirt hadn't been found at the proper place and the proper time, Jeff Loomis' life might have been that of an ordinary cowpuncher. But as it was —well, we have to go back a few years for the circumstances leading to the final blowup.

In the summer of 1879 a pair of hungry

Irishmen snubbed their picks into some black sulphuret of silver. This miserable looking stuff they sifted lazily and rubbed their astounded eyes to discover it washing out every sundown a thousand dollars in gold.

At the first whiff of this golden scandal young Jefferson Loomis, son of a poor Humboldt rancher, laid quirt to a half-broken mustang and stopped not for rest nor food nor sleep until he had staked a 300-foot claim in the vitals of Six-Mile Canyon.

He cleaned up, perhaps, half a million. He bought two ranchos in Nevada and two in New Mexico; one north of the Datil ranges and one south, in the Sanosan plain.

He celebrated by riding a longhorn bull which mashed him against a locust hedge and ruined his roping arm. They took it off close to the shoulder.

Lying in a city hospital, aching for something to do, Jeff fell in love with a nurse. She tried the ranch and couldn't stomach the dust, so Jeff had to hole up in apartments. Once each year he went back to make whoopee.

In 1912 Jeff turned fifty; and Goat Muncie greased out of the Federal cage at Leavenworth, moving westward mostly at night. His brother, Mugs, with a pal known as Hops, had a nice little hide-out in the skirts of the yellow pine mountains somewhere north of Jeff's Sanosan ranch.

In that same big year Jeff changed Bill Barnum from plain cowpuncher into foreman of the Sanosan.

"Because I think you got brains," he explained.

"You'll shore be disappointed," mourned Bill.

MUGS MUNCIE and Hops, like Goat Muncie, had failed in the exacting business of robbing mail coaches, and were now devoted to art—making letters on other folks' cattle. It was such hard work and such poor pay, with the neighboring cowmen so infernally loose on the trigger, that Goat did not take to it cheerfully. So he took a day off and jogged over the desert to the hamlet of Ceavi, on the railroad, to hear what he could hear.

He heard that Jeff Loomis, a millionaire, would be dropping off there in four weeks. He learned from a waddie who sampled his rotgut that old Jeff always [illegible] his foreman, Bill Barnum, with [illegible] vorite cowpunchers, who raced th[illegible] to his ranch. The course was s[illegible] and the going rough. They always s[illegible] Jeff the best horse.

Goat gave his nervous pinto the wheel. When he struck Albuquerque he sent sixteen telegrams. His acquaintance was wide as a polecat's. Ten of the telegrams were answered in person. The other six could not be, without saws.

Thirteen men are an unlucky lot to encounter in a silent coulee full of rabbit brush and white sage, especially if they have the drop. Bill Barnum, the foreman, had to lie down on his belly in the unsweetened dust, along with four dignified cow hands. Goat took their artillery, their horses, and Jeff. He advised them to tend the ranch faithfully in Jefferson's absence, not poking around nosily in arroyos and foothills—provided they loved their boss.

Bill and men pigeon-toed homeward. It was only three or four miles at most, over broken lava and alkali flour, and the June sun brightened their path. When they limped into the shade of the 'dobe bunkhouse, squatting like pretzels to pull at their boots, not one had a kind word for the Goat. None the less they respected his judgment. It wouldn't be wise to pursue.

Two days they faunched and pawed and cussed, galling under the strain of inaction. Then Bill's sorrel pony showed up. Gone was the red Spanish saddle that had cost him a three months' wage. Gone was the bridle with its silver stud. From the pony's mane, by a buckskin knot, dangled an alder stick. It was hollowed and sealed with chewed plug. Bill split it to read the note:

Bill, Old Timer, these jail buzzards have got me somewhere in the national forest, where they brought me blindfolded. They say if I don't write a check for $100,000, they will feed me to the coyotes. I told them I would milk a cow first. Anyway, I don't have that much in the bank. My nuggets are all salted in sand and cattle. If you want to sell the critters to save my skin, I won't bawl about it, though don't go to much trouble for my sake. I'm just an old crowbait, ready to be dragged down the coulee.

Don't try to come up here, Bill; because I would not get one of you boys punctured for all the gold in the Comstock. Whatever you do be skittish, as these buzzards would peck the eyes out of a locoed lamb. I elected you foreman be-

at you have brains, so use your bean, on't worry at all about me.

Yours as ever,

JEFF.

They say leave your answer on the Rock.

Bill fingered it through, aloud. The bootless pilgrims soaked it up silently.

AFTER some minutes one of the hands spoke—a rangy fellow called Forks.

"What happens if they rub the boss out?"

"You work for a woman," Bill grunted.

"Not me! I'd turn sheepherder first."

"And card wool with yore teeth," said another. The group nodded soberly.

"What you aim, Bill?" Forks queried.

"I aim to use my brains like the boss prescribes—condition, of course, I got any. Forks, you can sun your belly around clost for a spell. I'm bound to acknowledge this letter. The rest o' you gallant pedestr'ans can get the saddles we took from them hoss thieves and see if you forgot how to ride. Might round the north herd away from them blue mottes before they get into the larkspur."

Into the huge adobe box bunkhouse Bill disappeared; nor returned for more than an hour.

"I'm plumb tender about composin' litterchure," he confessed to Forks. "If a little larnin' is a dangerous thing, I'm a menace to civilization. But I reckon they will savvy the meat of it. Now you can escort this document to Elephant Rock—and ride like porcupines in your britches. Them gents might get tired waitin' and shoot Jeff for amusement. You could take the wall-eyed claybank; he's rested."

Saddled and straddled, the claybank legged out; past ranch house, past bunkhouse and kitchen; across a thin and glaring stream garnished with cornel and willow; along the sconce of a salty plateau, traversing a treeless basin.

To the Elephant Rock was a three-hour dog-lope. From the Rock to the foothills, five. The prehistoric plateau, scarred with dead washes, showed naked as truth to a man in the mountains behind the oak-pimpled hills. With a spruce tree to climb and a pair of field glasses a lookout could rake the whole scene.

When Forks neighbored the jumbo-like lump in the desert, as big as ten elephants, he circled it twice. It was easy to get a slug in the gizzard. No ambush. He posted his message. It stuck white and snug in a crevice of rock, while Forks sweated back to the ranch.

AT midnight a postmaster appeared. He delivered the letter to Goat and his gang next morning, at breakfast, roasting bandtailed pigeons on charcoal. Jeff was rending the breast of a savory squab as he secretly studied the landscape.

Goat's camp was laid in a juniper clump on the slopes of the national forest. The mountains behind and the plain below were screened by the stiff vegetation. Blue barberry and tea bush freckled the rocks, so Jeff guessed they were under nine thousand feet, perhaps in the hips of the Datil. No escape but dry death for an old man afoot. A man-killer guarded the horses. Up slope from the fire seeped a mineral spring; to the left of the spring a log cabin.

"Got mail," boasted Hops, the postmaster, looping his wilted horse to a shrub.

"Good boy," grinned Mugs Muncie, his pal.

"Gimme!" demanded Goat.

"It's addressed to old Leftwing over there."

"Gimme!" Goat snatched it from him.

"Polite as ever," sniffed Hops.

"They didn't teach say-it-with-roses where you and me went to school. Shut up! This is good." The wonted scowl melted from Goat Muncie's eyes; he chuckled with express pleasure. "Cripes, this is rich! Lefty's wife and three daughters light at Seavi tomorrow, where an old varmint picks 'em up in a wagon. Is this Christmas or not? Oh, cripes!

"You bolt a bite, Hops, and grab a few snores while Mugs grazes the brutes in the gully. Then lam out for Seavi the north trail round. Don't cut across within ten miles of the old boy's ranch house. Four men will be plenty. Keep your distance there, Lefty!" Jeff had edged up behind him.

"That's my letter, you polecat. You're robbin' the mails."

" 'Twouldn't be the first time. Take it and welcome, you stubborn old horned toad. Shore looks like money for us poor cowhands."

Jeff fixed his specs and went into the paper:

dear boss—we are doing our darndest to round up enuf cattle to get you away from them buzzerds. it may take up too weeks. old Skaggs is to aged for this hard work so he will meet your wife and three dauters tomorrow evening at Seavi and fetch them here in the spring wagun. please keep your saddle on boss and dont worry. we will cook up some exscuse for the ladies.

BILL.

"Listen here," Jeff cried, "you lousy sheep killer, you win. Lay off my family and I'll write a check for $25,000 and have Bill bring the money. That's all the loose cash I got."

"Thought you'd start bellerin' when we pulled that. You're too late. The pardon board has gone home. It's one hundred thousand now, if I don't raise the ante. Steady there—don't get too close or I'll bust you!"

"I can't raise it, damn you! I tell you I can't!"

"Your cattle can, grandpop. You got a smart foreman."

Jeff limped to the cabin and shouldered the door shut.

"Bet he's weepin' his heart out," a young gunman surmised.

"Every tear is a cartwheel," said Goat.

HOPS napped until Goat booted him out of his blanket; then hit the long trail with his gang. There was Bunce, an ex-buster, who was caught at card cheating. He had shot his way out. Three corpses beckoned him to the gallows.

There was Curly, the young gunman, Hops' brother, with a hunger for thrills and a weakness for women. An Omaha jeweler had indiscreetly reached for a gun, so Nebraska was reaching for Curly.

The fourth, Nig, a mining camp follower gone wrong, bragged of Roman blood in his veins. A warden said it must have been Nero's. He set a prison afire to escape. Not used to rough riding, he suffered and swore, dismounting at times, galled and groaning.

"Hard guys have soft rumps," sneered Bunce, the ex-buster.

"My trigger finger ain't sore," Nig warned him.

They camped at night in a piñon patch and roused with the red-fa... beating the train to Seavi by a... the general store they bought c... potted ham, swabbed down w... strawberry pop.

"You boys work at the Sanosan ... sociable merchant asked.

"Uh-huh," grunted Bunce through a mouthful. "The old man's wife and dorters is comin', I hear."

"He don't own no dorters—not unless they's hatched mighty recent." The merchant treated himself to a peanut.

The gunmen gazed at one another amazed. They gulped off their sodas with indelicate haste and sought a safe spot for a confab.

"Looks phoney," frowned Hops.

"It's a trap," agreed Nig.

"Let's quirt outa here," urged Bunce.

"Let's shoot it out," proposed Curly, "I wanta try my new automatic."

"Try it on your own brains," snapped his brother. "It'll take a crack shot to hit 'em. Ain't that a wagon comin'?"

A dust cloud crawled from the desert. They watched it, half blinded by the low hanging sun. A team emerged—a spring wagon—Skaggs humped on the seat, dry and cracked as an old water bottle.

"On your nags!" hustled Hops. "We'll soon see what's under the woodpile!" They chop-trotted from town carelessly, doubling back along the bed of a brushy wash that horned into the scarp of the railroad. At the head of this gully they lay concealed, peeping out at the matchbox station of Seavi, some two hundred yards up the track.

FOUR women got off the train, fortified with a stack of suitcases. All were hatted, half veiled, clad in light summer ulsters to protect their clothes from the dust. Skaggs floored his wagon with the feminine luggage, disposing the ladies on top. One perched on the seat beside him.

"Looks on the level," said Bunc.

"So does cheese to a rat." Nig was leery.

"What'll Goat say," mused Curly, "if we go back without game?"

"Tuh hell with Goat!" Hops' jealousy flared. "What I'm thinkin' about is the loot. Recollect how green the old Left-wing turned when he heerd we was after

"Let's go! Gotta head 'em!"

ced for the snag-toothed lava
miles from the Sanosan ranch.
e road nosed into this horse-
strip the gunmen cougared in am-
bush. Skaggs' team spanked along at a home-coming trot, slowing down as they entered the bad lands. The last red dregs of the poured out sun were draining off the weird mesa.

"Just right for the getaway," muttered Hops. "Do your stuff, gents." He rode out from his rock to block the team's way. His pals covered Skaggs with blue muzzles.

"Light, old feller, and git!" barked Hops. Skaggs got. Stumbling and scrambling, he panted from sight, dodging zigzag as if he feared bullets. The men grinned and holstered their weapons.

"Lead my nag," Hops ordered his brother. He climbed to the driver's seat. "Ca'm yourselves, ladies." He leered knowingly. "You got plenty excitement ahead."

The panicky group recoiled.

"'S'all right," he added, and by way of a friendly gesture tickled the girl beside him under the chin.

She came to life like a scalded cat, fetching him such an unladylike sock on the jaw that he pin-wheeled out to the roadside.

"It's a plant!" screeched Curly, droping the lead of Hops' horse. His wild hand dashed to his pistol.

"I wouldn't," said Bill, "you're all covered."

THE outlaws were loaded into the wagon, roped back to back to dissuade them from jumping. Hops swayed to and fro, only half lucid. Bill drove a hundred yards or so until he picked up old Skaggs.

"Good thing we walled off one end of the grubhouse and had our jail ready," one of the daughters was grinning at Bill.

"That was plumb foresighted," the foreman agreed.

"Wait till Goat gets through with your boss," taunted Nig. "You maybe won't think you're so smart."

"A little larnin'," sighed Bill, "is a dangerous thing. And I may be all loco. But I got a hunch this Goat, as you calls him —maybe Skunk would fit better—I got a hunch he'd ruther have cash than revenge. Leastwise, I'm all for playin' them cards."

Nobody talked after that—not until the gang was unroped in the ready-made jail, fed and watered and supplied with tobacco. Bill came in, looking doleful.

"I regret I got to send one of you tinhorn kidnapers out to your Goat with a letter. I want to send the hombre he knows best and trusts most."

"That's me!" Nig jumped at freedom. "Him and me was school kids together."

"Applesauce!" Hops scorned him. "You ain't knowed him two years. Do I know the Goat—huh! We wasn't schoolmates together, but we was cell mates together, and if I'd opened my mouth the last time he was in, he'd of put on a government necktie. That's what I've done for the Goat."

"Guess you're my little pigeon," Bill nodded. "First I'll try a smoke signal at Elephant Rock. If that won't coax him out, I can send you. Good night, gents, and sleep gentle. Jeff's daughters is all powerful nervous."

THE smoke signal, next evening, excited Goat's gang. Much worried, they argued about it. "It's a truce smoke," Jeff advised, "to talk business."

"They can wait till dark then," Goat asserted. "I ain't publishin' the lay of this hide-out." After supper he steered Mugs aside:

"This might be a frame-up to split the gang; so I'm goin' alone to find out. Set four lookouts, 'stead of two, and stick to old Lefty like a horsefly. If shootin' starts, git him first. Let 'em know they been up against Muncies."

Night sat on the Elephant Rock; the smoke sign disappeared. Goat's pinto had tremulous footing until the moon swung her gibbous lamp over the mesa with glare enough to read a newspaper. He sighted the Rock in six hours. At fifty yards he dismounted. A man lay asleep at the Elephant's tail, his horse on a picket, his six-gun hanging boldly against the rock, propped into a niche with clay putty.

A sign of peace, clearly, but the rock might be ambushed. There was room for a bunkhouse on top. Goat shied a small pebble. Bill Barnum reared upright; his alert sorrel whimpered. A lizard scaled through the moonlight. Bill gaped and

straightened his blankets. Goat was satisfied now.

"You waitin' for somebody?" His voice was a challenge. He shuffled forward, leading his horse.

"For a hombre called Goat—or his buddies." Bill's accent was mild, disarming.

"Speak your piece, then. I'm it."

"Be sociable. Squat down. Roll a smoke." Goat acquiesced, while his eyes searched Bill's person. A dagger can hide like a snake. Goat had hid them himself, on occasion.

"A gent they calls Hops. . . ." Bill paused.

Goat started. "Hops, huh? Well, I'm listenin'. Go on."

"This gent they calls Hops meets some ladies ridin' peaceful-like on the range, and conducts himself so flirtatious we has to plunk him in jail."

"Jail? There ain't no jail on this desert."

"The boys fixed that up. They walled off the south end of the 'dobe kitchen. 'Taint the elaborate kind your friends is all used to, but it's clean and the beans is served regular."

"So that skirt stuff was a trap!" He boiled to his feet. "You're a smart cow nurse, feller. Well, damn you, hang Hops and his blunderin' fools. Means four less to split with. I've still got your prize steer and I'll twist his tail till he yells cash. And right here let me tip you: a .45 Colts roosts at the back of the old boy's neck, and it's set at full cock!" He seized the horn of his saddle.

"Hold on, feller! You make me feel bad, gettin' all crogered that way. I ain't used to such rough languidge. As I was sayin' about Mr. Hops, he's a gent of low gratitude. He's done forgot all about your past kindness and has commenced spillin' the beans."

"You're bluffin'. He's spillin' what?"

"I ain't quotin' this for a fact, so don't tell nobody, but it seems this Hops hombre blames you for his humiliations and wants to see a government marshal quite pronto. It seems he knows enough about your childhood mistakes to bring an army regiment here to escort you back to a necktie party."

"Well, let's have it—what's up your sleeve?"

"Oh, I just wanted to dicker a little. You turn Jeff Loomis fre[illegible] and I'll turn Hops loose with[illegible] to ride, so he won't be unde[illegible] to mention them indiscretions o[illegible] forgot to mention in court. Ain[illegible] neat bargain?"

Goat pondered, his expression bitter, his fingers working the bridle ends.

"I'll see the gang and let you hear later."

He galloped off quickly. Out of earshot he reined up.

AT the dark edge of dawn several men in the bunkhouse sat up alertly, aroused by a single shot. Forks hopped out, barefoot, to investigate. Returning soon, he began shaking the foreman:

"The Goat has plugged his pal Hops through the winder!"

"Already?" Bill yawned. "That feller shore is efficient. Does Hops' kid brother say it was the Goat?"

"The kid informed me he knowed it. The Goat, the kid says, rode up to that six-inch winder and plopped in a handful of rocks. Which the same wakes up all our zoo. Then he calls soft to Hops to come clost, and Hops obliges him.

"'Is that you, Hops?' asks the Goat. 'It's me,' says Hops, 'but be careful.' 'I'm bein' careful,' allows the Goat, 'just bein' careful. Take this to the United States marshal.' Then his gun explodes in Hops' face."

"How did Curly like that?" wondered Bill.

"If I was the Goat's nanny I'd be plumb worried, that's all."

Whatever Curly felt, he said nothing. He passed up his breakfast, but pitched off two cups of black coffee. He smoked more tobacco than is good for one man. His right hand kept rubbing his hip.

Afternoon Bill invited him out of the jail. "Gotta help me fix fence," he explained.

They rode to the horse corral. Curly patched at the rails until he caught Bill off guard, then streaked to his horse and bolted. Bill blazed at him twice and missed him clean, though reputed to be a crack shot.

Bill followed him, not too fast. If Curly suspected, he paid no attention. He might have ducked into dozens of draws to blot

...he didn't. He cut a bee ... Elephant Rock. The heat ...could not wait.

...ere between Elephant Rock and ...ed rim of the desert Bill climbed ...a rise, a rocky wart on the red-faced mesa. Here he parked and baked in the blood-sucking sun, holding a telescope lens on that pale furl of dust until he saw the kid penetrate the foothills. He took all his bearings specifically, and photographed in his eye the exact point where the dust disappeared.

In that neck of the national forest no living stream flowed. Springs were scanty and miles apart. Men cannot hide without water. From the route Curly chose, Bill had a warm hunch. He could find the kidnapers' camp in the dark.

CURLY used the best path through the scratchy hills, an ancient animal trail. He signaled the guard and was passed. Reeking dust, sweat and fury he burst on the ken of the astounded outlaws playing poker under the trees. Plunging impetuously out of the saddle he singled Goat out with a rush.

"You double-crossing coyote! I ain't got no gun, but I'm goin' to beat you to death with my fists!" Goat, half haunched on his heels, could not lose his cards quickly enough. The blow on the nose knocked him winding. As the kid pounced upon him Goat kicked with both feet. A painful gasp. Curly rushed again. Goat shot him twice through the vitals.

Staring at his murderer terribly, the kid slowly sank.

"You double-cross . . . " he groaned and passed out.

The men gathered, dumb. It required a moment to digest what had happened.

"What you kill him for, Goat?" A sunseared rustler demanded. "He wasn't packin' no gun."

"Sure," chimed somebody. "The kid wasn't heeled."

"A dirty trick!" growled another. "Curly was a good scout."

Goat found himself baited by a pack of fanged wolves. He was too shrewd to try to play bully.

"I thought he was armed," he mumbled. "It was pure self-defense. I don't know what he was peeved about. Reckon somebody bribed him to split up the gang. We got to stick together, boys. Let's finish the game."

"We'll bury the kid first," said the rustler. His voice was low and hard.

No games were played immediately; but after supper they began to forget.

BILL BARNUM, snaking tortuously among tea bushes and juniper trunks, located the camp by the whine of a pony. He saw four outlaws stacking chips by a tiny dry fire.

A fifth man, some twenty yards from the group, lazily haunted Jeff Loomis, who lolled against a tree, smoking. This man was Mugs, with "instructions." From downhill in the dark came the stamping of ponies on picket. And somewhere, Bill guessed, along the trails of the hills a number of lookouts were hiding. One might be ten feet from his heels.

He was sharply tempted to shout, "Hands up!" and make a brass play to capture the gang. But he didn't. These hombres were rope marked, and they might not obey. Mugs might plug Jeff as per schedule. Nor could two men herd five desperadoes through the growthy foothills at night—except in a fairy book. He would try using his bean and not disappoint Jeff. By inches he wormed up to Mugs.

Mugs suddenly stiffened. He sat very wordless and still. Something hard and suggestive was boring into his back. A hand tenderly lifted his gun from its nest; glided smoothly up his left arm and clamped onto his biceps with a pressure that gorged the veins.

"Good evenin', gents!" sang Bill. Four guns flushed up like a covey of quail. At the instant they could not see him because of Mugs' body.

"Put 'em down and be sociable. I'm all alone, to talk business, but I'm warmin' my iron in this hombre's kidneys so nobody will speak out of turn."

"Park your guns," urged Goat anxiously. "We can't trade Mugs for a cowhand."

"That's fine." Bill's tone was enthusiastic. "I allus was afraid of them things. I just cootered in to get my little playmate, Curly. He ran away mad. Where is he?"

"He's dead," the rustler replied bitterly.

"He shot hisself," interposed Goat.

"Doggone, I'm sorry! He was a nice

kid. Only he would talk too much. After you killed Hops the kid maybe learned you had two others marked for the slaughter—"

"That's a damn' lie!" shrieked Goat.

"How do we know?" The savage rustler peered through the fire-light like an angry mountain lion. "Tryin' to gobble the split, huh? That's why the kid called you!" His arm was flexed against his side; his hand an inch from his gun butt.

Goat made the mistake better leaders have made: he misjudged his man.

"Take your hand from that gat, or I'll drill you!"

This was all the Westerner needed to convince him Goat had schemed to betray him. He drew fast, but Goat beat him. He winged Goat badly even as he slumped to his finish, two .45 slugs in his heart.

AS the guns spurted across the poker chips Jeff eased toward Bill like a shadow. Noiselessly he groped for Mugs' gun on the ground. When he clutched it he wraithed swiftly into the deep murk between the trunks of two trees.

"Hands up! I got you all covered!" Jeff drew on the nearest man.

Their hands came up, but came shooting. Three six-guns lanced fire. One outlaw went down; the other missed Jeff. The skinny old man in the distant shade was only a target to guess at. Realizing he had missed, himself framed in the fire glow, the fellow started to run. Bill opened up then, plugging low at his legs till he dropped him.

Sensing his chance, Mugs whirled, flailing his arm out stiff, like a club. Bill flashed his right up, to guard. Wrists met with a bruising crash. The weapon was shocked from his hand. He expl[illegible] in a crazy left swing that [illegible] landed in daylight. It met [illegible] on the solar. He retired for th[illegible] found his six-shooter and waited.

Goat lay on the ground bleeding [illegible] his left hand wedging his wound. The rustler's lead had clipped a lobe of his lung.

Jeff and Bill disarmed the two wounded. They tethered Mugs to a tree. While Jeff loped for the ranch, Bill set his ambush in shape to watch for the lookouts, but the lookouts declined to show up. They imagined a posse had assaulted the camp. The sudden hush of the bombardment convinced them. They straddled their ponies and traveled. One died in the forest, lost. Uncle Sam spent two years, three lives, and several thousand in cash tracking down the other three.

After a few days of rest in solitary confinement, his wound well corked and his stomach well filled, Goat begun to rattle his horns. He was cheering the gang with tales of past daring when Bill Barnum came in with a sheriff.

"The carriage waits, gents," Bill announced. "This handsome young man is your chauffer. I shore hope, after all we've done for you hombres, you'll invite us all to your hangin'."

"You think you're a smart guy now," flared Goat. "You're just a dumb cow chaser that got a few breaks. I'm warnin' you right now I'll be loose in a month; then I'll pay you what you got comin'!"

Bill studied him sadly. "I got to admit you're 'bout right. I don't know very much. A little larnin', they say, is a dangerous thing; but there shore is one thing every up-to-date bad man ought to know—never make no cowboy walk home."

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A Novelet of Old Mexico

QUIRK BANNISTER'S catgreen eyes never shifted their gaze from Wasp Moxel's livid face. He coolly ignored the fact that Moxel's claw-fingered right hand was hovering above the butt of his well-worn six-gun.

"I'm tellin' you, for the last time—I ain't sellin' Rancho Rio." Quirk's voice

was low and even. A man who took pains to use his head a bit, and who did not fancy himself so much as Wasp Moxel did, would have been warned by the very steadiness of that voice.

Moxel's huge bulk of a body was trembling as he fought himself into a killing rage. Beneath the bush of his overhanging brows, his shifty eyes glittered and his almost lipless mouth was a drawn line under the dirty mustache that made his receding chin seem no chin at all.

"I'm offering you ten times what its worth," Moxel growled.

"Wrong." Quirk's brown, muscular hands were shaping up a smoke. He continued to gaze straight at Moxel, and Moxel seemed to squirm. "Yeah—" Quirk dribbled smoke from his nose—"you're wrong. An' I'll tell you why, hombre.

"You wanted my R-R spread when I bought her two years ago. I smelt a skunk right then. My range ain't no better than yours. Your outfit lays west of me, right along the Rio Grande. You got water. But—" Chuck smiled wryly— "you ain't got no crossing to the Mex side, like I have. An' you ain't got no brush an' 'squite an' willow down to the bank, like I have.

"So you want my spread, so you won't have to go ten mile out your way, an' take chances of bustin' into the border patrol, when you trail your guns and beef across the river."

"You dam' preacher!" Moxel spat the words. "I ain't the only one that runs beef across the river. And when you say I'm rustling—"

"You didn't have to go an' pull that boot on—if she didn't fit," Quirk spoke slowly. "An' as for the beef I run across—it goes to the Federal government. There's no Rurales watchin' for me on the other side, an' no Rangers or border men on this side—sabe?"

"All right!" Moxel snapped. "Since you're so dam wise, supposing I have been running beef and guns across to the revolutionists. Granting that's why I want this outfit of yours—what're you going to do about it?"

"Nothin'." Quirk flipped the butt of his cigaret out the open door of the adobe shack. "Nothin' a-tall, Moxel, if I don't lose no beef off Rancho Rio. You said you offered me far more than she was worth. You know I'm holdin' fi[illegible] of prime stuff here to be [illegible] the Federale troops under [illegible] Pomposa. I been missin' a lit[illegible] an' then. I don't want that to [illegible] more—*sabe?*"

"It won't!" Moxel barked. "It won't, because I'm putting my iron on you. That beef'll never go down the gullets of those government devils. It'll be fodder for rebel bellies—and you'll be buzzard fodder, while I get this place where I can get at the crossing! No, it ain't going to happen. . . ."

There was magic in the speed of his hand and wrist as he drew his gun. Gun runner and snaky border rancher? Was that all? Hell, no! No petty, crooked Rio rancher could draw a gun like that. Wasp Moxel was a gunman—and few there were who might have stood up to him in that, or any other, part of Texas or Mexico.

QUIRK BANNISTER'S gun was hanging on a nail on the wall. He was unarmed. But that made no difference. Murder was one of Wasp Moxel's specialties. It didn't bother him that he was going to shoot Quirk Bannister down in cold blood, and Quirk unarmed.

Unarmed? Mebbe-so Moxel figured wrong. For, as he drew, Quirk seemed to leave his feet and dive. His head struck Moxel in the stomach and he locked strong, sinewy arms around Moxel's, pinning Moxel's arms close to his body as they careened out of Quirk's shack and thudded on the hard-baked ground outside.

Quirk was almost as tall as Moxel. But he lacked many pounds weight. Moxel's was the strength of a bull, with bunched, hard muscles. Quirk was the constrictor, his strength evenly distributed and his muscles those that make a body seem slender—and so deceive one.

Moxel cursed and twisted, trying to wrench his gun arm free. Like a mad coyote, he snapped at Quirk's face with tobacco-yellowed fangs. Slowly, the breath was squeezed from his body. Moxel grunted and squirmed. Suddenly, Quirk released him. A hard fist smashed Moxel's head down to the ground when he strove to rise. Quirk jerked him to his feet.

Dazed, Moxel tried to pull his gun again. His head popped and roared. He knew

...d the hot smell of his own ...nering of terrible blows. ...rked from his hand. Moxel ..., he was badly whipped.

...ered toward his horse, and not ...s in the saddle did he turn and look at Quirk. Quirk, his mouth twisted queerly, his jaw thrust squarely forward, leaned against the side of the adobe and grunted contemptuously.

"That finishes you, you straight-laced son!" Moxel squalled.

He jabbed his horse cruelly with the spurs and rode off through a sea of mesquite and dry-leaved sage, sand and prickly pear. Quirk, his battered gray sombrero pulled low over his eyes to shade out the glaring sun, idly watched a buzzard circling in the domeless sky across the river on the Mexican side. A green lizard scuttled upon a hot rock, mouth open, throat working swiftly.

Quirk nodded slowly. He knew that hell had cracked open at last. Quirk was no fool. He also knew that, while he had given Wasp Moxel a whipping, Moxel was not beaten! The rebels were back of Moxel. And Quirk had been selling his beef to the Federale government because they would pay almost double prices for food on the hoof as delivered to certain hard-pressed companies of soldados not far across the Rio Grande. So, that made the revolutionists against him on two counts.

"Well," said Quirk, turning on the high heel of his plain-stitched half boot, "let 'em be. I ain't never run yet. I don't aim to start now."

He went inside the shack. Slowly, thoughtfully, he took down the old Colt and buckled the belt about his tapering hips. He tried it, to see that the holster was smooth. There was no lightning speed to the draw. But it showed something. No one but a master could have used that wrist-and-thumb draw. Quirk hadn't used that gun much since he'd come down from the Panhandle two years before.

Yes, if Moxel hadn't been so sure; hadn't been so fanciful and gun-proud, he might have learned more and that to his advantage. Quirk pulled down a .30-.30 rifle from another nail and carefully inspected and oiled it.

No, he wasn't aiming to run—none whatever.

II

QUIRK hunkered in a willow fringe, rifle beside him, and watched the river crossing. Worth a lot, to have a good crossing touching on your ranch. Yes, but it might cost a lot, too. Moxel wanted that crossing. The way it was, he had to keep along the river for nearly ten miles, before he could shove across to the Mexican side. There were chances of busting into the patrol, roving Rangers, or tangling up with bands of rum and Chink runners in the dark, on that run.

That was why Moxel had tried, first, to buy Quirk Bannister out; second, to rustle him out. He needed Quirk's place badly. And now that he knew Quirk Bannister was onto his game, he'd make it a point to rub Quirk out. No doubt about that.

Quirk gave Moxel credit for having brains. That was why he, Quirk, crouched in the willows and watched that crossing. Most men would have passed the idea that Moxel would strike so quick—the night of the very day he had threatened to smoke Quirk out. There would be surprise in hitting so quick, and Quirk figured it that way.

He started as a crackling sounded in the brush back of him, listened a moment, then settled down again as some night-prowling animal came down to the bank, then disappeared down river. The faint light of a crescent moon gave things an enlarged, distorted aspect, and cast flickering shadows on the stream of dobe soup that was the Rio Grande, gurgling over the rocks of the crossing.

Quirk must have dozed. For the blasting roar far behind him brought him jumping-jacking to his feet, rifle gripped in cold-numbed hands. He listened to the dying echoes of the blast that had so startled him. Now, coming faint but clear on the still night air, the sounds of cattle that had been suddenly roused and started on the drive. Men shouted and whooped. Another rocking blast sounded, and now, as he watched, a faint glow of crimson lighted up the sky. Lighted up—right about where the few buildings of Rancho Rio stood!

Quirk ran swiftly back to where his horse was tied, flung himself into the

saddle and raced toward the sounds of bawling cattle and shouting men. He was afire inside, yet his flesh seemed to prickle with chills of almost insane rage. He'd figured, yes. But hard as he tried to map the other's probable attack, he had figured wrong. Moxel had out-smarted him. He'd gotten help. Rebels, Quirk knew it. They'd done some figuring, too.

And they'd figured he'd watch his crossing. One man couldn't hold off a massed raid on a herd of half-wild steers. But he could hold off a small army if he was holed up in the dark with his guns trained on that river path. So they'd crossed on the Tejano Ford, ten miles up, and come around the back door!

A stream of blasting oaths burst from Quirk's anger-white lips as he topped a swale and looked down. His stable was going up in smoke, casting wavering light over a scent of destruction. He knew now what those blasts had been. They'd either dynamited or bombed his 'dobe shack, since it wouldn't burn. And they believed that Quirk Bannister was in that shack!

They'd missed copping a bet there, and Quirk intended they should pay for that mistake. He was seeing red, as he watched ahead and saw the mounted men that were driving his steers; driving them toward him. Quirk was killer-mad, or he might have stopped to think, before he plunged on.

Why, if they figured he was watching that crossing, they would know he wasn't in that blasted shack. They were wrecking things, wiping out Rancho Rio for keeps! Mebbe-so they figured that blast would bring Quirk helling back if he was guarding the crossing; figured that would bring him out in the open. If he wasn't —well, he was a dead booger anyhow, killed off in the ruins of his place. But Quirk didn't stop to think.

He leaned close to his mount's neck and raced ahead. He caught a flash of a rider as the man rode into the light of the burning board stable. The Mexican sombrero and silver-trimmed jacket; the light flashes showing the butts of two guns—pearl butts that were hand carved—told Quirk that it was Wasp Moxel.

He dropped his reins over his saddle horn and raised his rifle to his shoulder. Before he could pull trigger, something slashed the night befo
bres raised from beh
and grass where they
and set their guns to roar.

The terrible scream of
made the night more hide
something sting his r
mid air when his horse fell out from under him. He was kicking, trying to get his balance so he could light on his feet and try to make a stand.

USELESS, that effort. Quirk Bannister smashed to the ground near his struggling, dying horse. A limp, huddled bundle, he did not move. A Mexican ran out. The other three joined him. They shouted and yelled. Wasp Moxel spurred away from the steers that were now being strung out toward the river and came to them.

One of the Mexicans shoved the toe of his boot under Quirk Bannister and rolled him over on his back. Blood soaked his shirt and jumper on the left side, blood streamed from under his matted hair and trickled down his face.

"Good work, *hombrecitos,*" Moxel grunted. "Leave him there for the buzzards."

He turned away, the others getting their horses and following him. Moxel had to work fast. Two hours before, he'd had another brush as he led the rebel killers across Tejano Ford. He'd left one—maybe two—border officers back there for dead. Moxel was going to go over and stay on the Mex side, at least until he found out if they knew who had done it.

The shouts of the riders and bawl of the herd grew fainter as they drove on toward the river. Louder shouts as the herd was driven into the water at the crossing. Then, gradually, the ringing silence of the night.

A coyote yapped; the last burning embers of the stable flared up, then settled down to a fading glow of hot ashes.

Funny, how lead will act. The best shots go wrong; the poor ones sometimes hit the most true. A jagged gash in the flesh of his side, scalp laid open to the skull, Quirk Bannister was far from dead. It couldn't have happened like that again in a million times. But a twisting, falling man is a poor target to get in a solid shot

ks the same, whether
or a mortal one.
is lips moved and he

l again. . . . Oh . . .

III

A MAZE of dirty, narrow alleys that twisted between house and patio walls; a barren plaza where the lint of a lone cottonwood drifted continually downward, and a hard-packed, sun-baked street that gave off clouds of stinging dust when rare breezes sprang up to break the monotony of the burning sun and blistering heat.

Breathless heat, it was.

Men's voices sounded muffled in the light air; the banging of doors were like muffled shots. Inside the cantinas, behind closed shutters men passed their time at the craps and card tables; dozed in chairs leaned back against the dirty 'dobe walls, or leaned on scarred bars and downed their favorite bowel-burning potions.

Around the town a sea of scraggly desert vegetation reached out to the river twenty miles to the north and east. It simmered and shot up heat devils to distort the vision to the west, where that hellish expanse was broken by the serried, barren hills fifteen miles away.

It seemed peaceful, this hell-hole that some very, very wise hombre had named Padre de Diablo. Father of the Devil! And it was!

QUIRK BANNISTER knew all of this. He stabled his roan at the edge of town, picking a place where the peon owner was too simple to take sides with anyone. Or, perhaps, so smart that he acted too simple to become involved. *Quien sabe?* The edge of a bandage still showed from under Quirk's sombrero. And under his jumper and shirt, strips of adhesive held a bandage to his side.

He was a man stripped for action now. His chaps hung on his saddle; his heavy .45, with its scarred rosewood butt close to his right hand, was swung on a filled cartridge belt.

Quirk reasoned that Wasp Moxel thought him dead. But, just in case Moxel didn't, and might be looking for him, he was going to be plenty ready. He was through trying to call cases in advance. Now, he would play the hunter's game, and let someone else do the guessing.

Quirk stopped in the doubtful shade of a graveyard wall that was higher than his head, and rolled a smoke. Moxel hadn't come back to his ranch, and it had been two weeks since that night. . . .

He flipped his match away and gazed out through the sea of heat waves toward Buzzard Barrens. Back there, somewhere, Moxel was holed up, with five hundred head of Quirk's cattle—all that he had owned. Maybe he was. And back in there somewhere, the last of the rebels were holed up, stealing out to murder and raid; defying the efforts of the Federale troops to get them out.

ESTABAN AGUIRRE was back in there somewhere, trying to rout them out. But the hombre who ram-rodded that ragged, dirty band was too foxy—too quick. Pancho Cruze, they said his name was. No one had heard of him, until the revolution, that was now all but crushed. Crushed, yet it reared its head and threatened to strike again, unless those who led the thing from Buzzard Barrens were routed out.

Was this Pancho Cruze the brains of it? Or, were the hombres who stirred up the hell right there in Padre Diablo? The man who could tell the Mexican government that would be rewarded richly indeed, señor. For it wasn't like going out and squashing out a known rebel generalissimo. You were dealing with worse than rebels, around Padre Diablo and Buzzard Barrens.

A Mexican came out of an adobe shack across the street. The sight of the tall gringo by the wall attracted him. As Quirk studied the Buzzard Barrens, the Mexican gasped. He crossed himself hurriedly, then looked again. Yes, that was the gringo they had left for dead. Señor Moxel was not in Padre Diablo. But Jose knew what he would say if he were there to give orders. He hurried on up the street and ducked into a *cantina.*

Out of the corner of his eye, Quirk noticed him. Also, he noticed the *vaquero*

who rode slowly down the street on a small flea-bitten dun. The Mexican turned when he reached the stable. He looked at Quirk piercingly for a moment, then turned his horse into the feed yard. Quirk finished his cigaret, covertly watching this hombre, who now made pretenses of business at the stable.

"Somebody," Quirk muttered half angrily to himself, "sure as hell knows me." He settled his cartridge belt and started up the street toward the *cantina*. He stopped as if to tuck his pants into a boot top, once, and cast a quick glance back. The hombre who'd left his horse was coming slowly along behind him. Quirk straightened up and walked on.

He knew it was a loco stunt, pulling into this hole alone. But nothing was going to stop him as long as he was up and breathing. Moxel had wrecked his ranch and run off his beef. Moxel had tried to murder him. And, Quirk reasoned, there would be hombres over here who weren't Moxel's friends. They wouldn't *all* be against him.

Warily, he approached the door of the *cantina*. And he was prepared for what happened.

Two Mexicans stepped suddenly out the door, one of them colliding with Quirk. *"Gringo coyote,"* Jose snarled. "Buzzard-dropped skunk. You—"

QUIRK lashed out, but quick as he was, the second of the pair had grabbed his arm and lessened the force of the blows. Jose went down, but not to stay. The other one clung to Quirk like a burr to a saddle blanket. Quirk beat him back and smashed a fist to his sweaty face. Behind him, Jose had come to his feet, and now raised a knife for the down stroke that would bury the long blade in Quirk's broad back.

Then a third figure went into action with a wild yell.

"Cabrone! What you call—jackass! Whoopie!" Jose went spinning, his knife flying from his hand. A whirlwind of fists and feet and gouging fingers followed him into the fog of dust that clouded up. Shrieks and curses from Jose and comic gringo slang from the attacker were howled out together.

Roberto, sick of the hard fists of the gringo who gave him [illegible] his knife, cowered in [illegible] feet after Quirk smashe[illegible] Men, Mexican and gringo, [illegible] formed an appreciative circ[illegible] battlers.

Quirk kicked Robert[illegible] sent him yelling awa[illegible] Out of the dust cloud on the ground, Jose emerged, scratched and battered, and tailed out behind the departing Roberto. Men laughed. It wasn't their battle. They didn't give a damn what it was about, nor who won. Now, it was over. They turned back to their drinks and their games.

Quirk picked up his *sombrero* and put it on his bandaged head. He looked, his expression puzzled, at the Mexican who'd come to his assistance. He was rather small; his face was wreathed in happy smiles. Quirk noticed his overalls and his jumper were very clean, and also, he instinctively knew that the round face that now smiled so happily could be a devil's face if occasion demanded.

What puzzled Quirk still more was the fact that this was the hombre who'd followed him from the stable. Quirk grunted. Then, this fight had been framed so the smiling one could appear to help him, and thereby become acquainted? Quirk couldn't believe that. Jose had been too badly gouged, bitten and beaten. That wasn't faked.

"Why did you horn in?" Quirk demanded.

"Me? *Señor,* I like heem ver' much, these fight. So, I am help. Me, I am one —what you call—hot tamale, eh? Make whoopie; make love and ver' much fight. *Si!*

"An' also, Señor Quirk Bannister," the little Mexican lowered his voice, "because I have no love for them *vinegarones* my ownself!"

IV

FOR a moment, Quirk was too surprised to speak. He looked at the other narrowly. Despite himself, Quirk could not help but grin. One hot tamale, huh? Well, he could put up one whale of a scrap, although he wasn't so particular how he fought. But what was his game?

"Hot Tamale—ees me. My name, Señor,"

chink Quirk was not
'm best dam' hombre

in for some reason. You
ne, an' I never seen you be-
aid. "Seems like a lot of
n't remember seein' be-
fore is tryin' to g- their irons in my fire. I—"

Quirk looked up the street. A Mexican was spurring his mount out toward the Buzzard Barrens. Was it the battered face of Jose that he saw looking his way, after he, Jose, had called something to the *hombre* on the *caballo?*

"They don't feel so much like ride. They sen' somebody else to tell some *hombre* something, huh?" Tamale suggested.

"Mebbe-so you know, hombre," Quirk grunted, "an' I'm givin' you a chance to explain the why and the wherefore of all this. Come on." Quirk crossed the street toward a *cantina* that was almost empty. Tamale—what a sad effort to make in picking a name to replace his real one, Quirk thought—made no protest. He smiled and jabbered and seemed very pleased.

Quirk took a table in a corner and sat with his back to the wall. Grimly, he noticed the little Mexican placed his chair so he, too, could see the door, scooting around close to Quirk's elbow. Quirk loosened his gun significantly. Tamale grinned.

"All right." Quirk fanned cigaret smoke out of his face. "Spin your yarn, hombre. An' it better be good!"

"There is not much—what you say—yarn." Tamale picked up his glass of tequila. Quirk noticed he drank very little. "It is that I hear of Rancho Rio being raid. I know some things, Señor Quirk. I understan' you are not dead hombre. I understan' men, Señor Quirk, so I know you are come along—*si.*

"Me, I am once own leetle *rancho.* But now, like you, I am—what you say—boosted. I am ver' broke, me. So I fight, an' drink an' make the love a leetle sometime. But all the time I am watch. I maybe fin' my cows an' get these hombre what is boost me—*si.*

"I know you come, maybe. Two of us, we geeve them hell—*si.* I know this country, Señor Quirk. You are fightin' *hombre.* Both of us, we work together."

Tamale spread his hands wide and shrugged to indicate that was all. Quirk noticed they were well-kept hands. Not the hands of a Mexican ranchero. And the butt of the gun that peeped from under Tamale's poor quality sash wasn't the butt of a cheap gun, either.

There were many small ranchers, broken by the bandits and revolutionists. This hombre who fought like a wildcat and who seemed so pleasant—yet declared he longed to pay his blood debts—might be what he said. Still, how did he know so much about what happened across the Rio Grande? A few Mexican *Rurales* knew some of the U. S. border men knew. But no one else. Few, if any, in Padre Diablo, would have bothered. And—Tamale had known him by sight. Maybe that was because Moxel's men had piled onto him. So, then, Tamale knew Moxel's hombres?

"I see the señor does not, maybe, like the hot tamale for so sudden a dinner." Tamale pushed back his chair and arose. "You think over what I say, Señor Quirk. Soon, I come back." He bowed and turned his back, walking out and down the street.

Quirk rolled another querly. This hombre knew too much. He was playing a game. "Well," Quirk muttered to himself, "the way to win a pot is to sit in the game. I'll take me some chips."

HE went out into the torrid afternoon. Down the street, Tamale was talking to a young *señorita* whom he had cornered by a patio wall. They were talking earnestly. He looked up, saw Quirk watching him. Tamale raised his voice.

"One kees, for this—what you say—burnin' poppa. Ay, that is good. Me, I'm what they call sheek, eh?" He kissed the girl again and let her go. Quirk, eyes almost closed, looked the other way. When he turned back, Tamale was gone.

Quirk went back into the *cantina.* The fat hombre behind the bar dozed. He had no games in his place; he did little business during the heat of the day, and was not going to waste energy serving a loco gringo who wandered around in the heat outside. Quirk was glad of that. It gave him a chance to think while he waited for Tamale to return. Things were moving slow right then. But Quirk would have bet a double stack of blues that this was

just the temporary calm before a storm.

Those two Mexes that had jumped him; the one who'd ridden out toward Buzzard Barrens after talking with one of the battered ones. Quirk didn't know that two of those hombres had been the ones who'd leaded him out of the saddle that night. If he had things would have picked up—*pronto!*

From somewhere in the jumble of peon jackals back of the one main street came the rattle of rapid gunfire. Quirk idly wondered if some devil had started or finished a private war, or if it was just plain fireworks. Well, it wasn't his rope being cut. He remained where he was.

Men walked rapidly by outside when someone started yelling from over in the direction where the shots had sounded. Quirk yawned and watched the door.

TAMALE stepped quickly inside the door. Then, his hurried movements suddenly slowed. He straightened his jumper and his sash and strolled toward Quirk, grinning. Quirk felt he was a bit more cynical than pleasantly cheerful. And wondered why.

Hot Tamale sat down. Quirk grunted softly. He noticed the gun in Tamale's sash was not shoved down. The side of the cylinder showed, and faint blue-white streaks as of burned powder—freshly burned—showed thereon.

"Señor Quirk," Tamale sighed in a relieved manner when he sat down, and Quirk noted he was breathing heavily, as a man who has been running in the heat, "I have foun' out somethings. Your cows are back in this Buzzard Barren, as are the cows of others. Perhaps mine. We should go there—"

"When Estaban Aguirre an' his soldados can't smoke them out—you think we could?" Quirk asked. "No, Tamale, you can't work a deal like that on me. I know where them cows is, without you tellin' me. Part of them are in rebel bellies. An' some are bein' ironed out, so's they can be run back across the Rio.

"I can't hope to get back my beef. I'm after a two-legged snake! An' I ain't fallin' for any your tricks to lead me into the hills where he can trap me—sabe?"

Hot Tamale looked at Quirk without speaking. His face was sad. He looked as if some fr
and kicked him withou

"An' why should you
anyhow?" Quirk wanted to
all you know, hombre, I mi
some of this wet business my
all this ranny-gazoo to h

"I don't trust too r
th—" Tamale caught himself and looked like he'd wished he'd bitten off his tongue. I thought of

"Uh-huh," Quirk nodded, "you ain't trustin' me any more than I'm trustin' you. Which makes her all the more complicated. Nope; I guess you better go your way, an' be dam' sure-fire certain you don't try to mess me up when I go mine. If you do, they'll be one less hot tamale in this chili-land, dam' *pronto!*"

Quirk got up, loosened his gun in the holster again, and strolled to the door, watching Tamale out of the corner of his eye. He started to step into the street. Men were coming. They carried something. Quirk saw they carried the bodies of two men, and he thought again of the shooting he'd heard. Callously, the bearers dumped the bodies in the shade of the *cantina* wall and went inside to get a drink before journeying on to the grim plots inside the graveyard wall across the street.

Sightless, glazed eyes stared at nothing. No signs of shooting except a small blue hole over one man's eye and a small stain on the left breast of the other's shirt. Wiping their mouths, the strange funeral procession came back out, picked up the bodies and cut across the street.

Quirk noticed that Jose's hands left a snaky trail in the dust as they dragged. Roberto had died with one leg drawn up. It was still that way. Those two *cabrones* would never hop him again.

Come to think of it—hadn't that *señorita* Tamale had talked to motioned over in that direction where the shooting had been? And the powder on Tamale's gun; his hurried breathing when he'd returned to the *cantina*. . . .

Well, if that was so, then Tamale wasn't a friend of Moxel's. Quirk knew it was Moxel's men who'd jumped him. No one else had reason to, over here. Quirk cursed. Who in the hell, then, was this Hot Tamale gent?

He turned around. Tamale was standing nearby. He smiled at Quirk again.

was tantalizing mirth

...y a word. He started
...able. Tamale, taking two
...rk's one, stayed beside him.
much. But his few words
...e time for trusting has
come, Señor Qu... But first, we ride."

Quirk nodded.

V

THEY rode out of town in silence, watching the sunset shooting the skyline with fire. Beautiful, now, in the softening light, that country that had been so hideous a few minutes before. Finally, Quirk broke the silence.

"Why did you shoot those hombres, Tamale?"

"Because it is best that no wolves they follow the trail when there are wolves on the trail ahead," Tamale said. "Besides, they talk, Señor Quirk. They tell me a leetle. But not enough. They die, like I promised."

"Uh-huh. An' that *señorita?* Your love makin' was a fake, Tamale."

Tamale chuckled. "You have sharp eyes. You cannot—what you say?—run one whim-wham on *Señor* Quirk Bannister. That girl—but, poof! She is but a woman. Let us talk about something else."

Quirk's expression was one that told he was willing to talk of something else—but that he would not forget that woman. "All right—how come you to know who I was?" he demanded.

"Because—because I, Señor Quirk, am Eduardo Estaban, Capitan of Rurales, not so long ago. Now I do work for my country like your secret service—*si.* I know, therefore, much what is happen along the border. I know, Señor Quirk, you are peaceful *hombre,* but one what will fight. Like I say, I know you come. Still, I could not trust you. Even now, I do not know for sure, you see."

QUIRK was beginning to believe this patient, yet fiery, little caballero. And sort of wanted to really trust him. Then, Quirk chanced to look back. Far back in the thickening dusk, a lone horseman followed their trail. Just a glimpse, then the rider was out of sight. Riding like a *hombre* that wanted to be there, but not seen.

Tamale, too, had turned. His face was a study in exasperation and anger.

"Friend of yours?" Quirk growled.

"Sometimes I think so. Sometimes—I am not so sure, *amigo.*"

Quirk didn't ask who. He didn't ask a thing, after that. He rode with his rifle loose in the boot and his gun loose in the holster. And he moved his horse over a bit from Tamale. The night was pressing with its silence. A faint moon gave but very little light. Buzzard Barrens, spectral, death-portending hills, loomed before them. Soon they were riding in those hills themselves.

Tamale would lead him to Moxel, and Moxel would be ready for him, Quirk believed. They would kill each other, maybe. And then, this Tamale *hombre* would be rid of Moxel—whom he owed for much beef and for many guns. For Quirk was certain that the man who rode beside him was Pancho himself! That was the reason he'd killed those who were faithful to his *gringo* ally! Yes, this was Pancho Cruze—and smarter than men had given him credit for, no doubt.

He'd let Quirk pull his chestnuts out of the fire—kill Moxel—because he, Pancho Cruze, was probably afraid to test his guns against the *gringo* gunman, and mebbe-so because Moxel had too many friends for Pancho to risk his leadership by gunning him.

Quirk smiled thinly to himself. No doubt the *hombre* who rode back of them would shower down on Quirk, after that. Yeah—he *thought* he would!

It was after midnight when the glow of a half dozen campfires shone in a gashed, barren, rocky canyon below them. Tamale whispered when he spoke.

"General Aguirre, I think. Shall we see?"

"Might as well," Quirk grunted. His lips curled at the clumsiness of the trick. Down there, he was willing to bet, was Moxel and some of that lousy bandit band. They removed their spurs and hung them on their saddles, then went silently toward the camp below them.

BEHIND loose boulders, they stopped, peeking cautiously out. And Quirk kept one eye on Tamale! He frowned at

what he saw. Hell, this did look like a Federale camp, at that. Sentries were on guard; their few ragged tents were pitched with precision.

"There," Tamale whispered and gripped Quirk's arm. "See, in front of the tent there. It is General Aguirre."

Quirk looked, then nodded. It was Aguirre. He recognized him from pictures he'd seen. Quirk moved to avoid a sharp point of rock that was gouging his stomach. Like a flash, Tamale was after the gun in his sash. Fast, that little Mexican. But he was slow—compared with the oiled motions of Quirk Bannister. Quirk's gun muzzle jabbed in Tamale's stomach.

"Well," Quirk's thumb clicked back the hammer, "what about it?"

"Amigo." Tamale looked straight into Quirk's blazing eyes. "It is meestake. I am sorry. I see you move. I think you are in with this Pancho an' Moxel, after all, an' inten' for to shoot our General Aguirre when you move like that. Now, I see I am wrong. Now, *amigo,* I really trust you!"

Quirk wanted to jump up and down and cuss. He wanted to shoot and have it out, instead of playing this game of wits. He wanted to do it a man's way—and damned if he wasn't going to!

He did not show how he felt, though. He seemed to accept Tamale's explanation, and slipped his six-gun back in the holster. Tamale gripped Quirk's arm again.

"Look," he whispered.

Aguirre was mounting a horse that had been brought up. Three of his men mounted others. They rode off into the night, beyond the light of the fires.

"Now." Tamale still talked in riddles. "I think we both got ideas, *amigo.* For why should General Aguirre ride forth at this time of the night? I remember, now, what you say about Pancho havin' no gold. But Aguirre, *amigo,* is costing our poor country much gold. Too much—*sabe?*

"Me—I am thinking, an' thanking you, *amigo,* for helping me."

"By God, you can't be Pancho!" Quirk growled.

"I'm glad you stop thinkin' that," Tamale said simply. "I saw it in your face, *amigo.* Now, we go on—no?"

"Yes," Quirk snapped. In the dark, their hands met and gripped. They turned and crawled off in th
horses. And now, fo
man did trust the othe

The game of wits was o
them in that maze of hell,
Moxel waited. Most likely
ceive them. And Federal
—he was somewhere
here, too.

VI

"YOU'RE thinkin'," Quirk spoke as they rode carefully down the bottom of a boulder-littered gulley, "that your General Aguirre is in with Pancho. That he's been usin' government money to pay off Moxel an' keep Pancho goin'?"

"I am blind!" Tamale's voice had a vicious ring to it. "It takes *gringo* brains to uncover such, señor. But yes, I think that now."

They rode a blind, dark trail, following in the general direction that Aguirre had taken when he left camp.

"I was wonderin' why Aguirre didn't smoke out these Barrens—make them hole up, at least," Quirk said. "Hmmm, wonder if all of his men are in on this?"

"No. That is impossible. Some of my *compañeros* in the *Rurales* are in his company. One Federale Capitan is once ride with me. I think that only those three who ride with him are—what you say?—wise up. Too much chance, for them all to know—*si?*"

Quirk suddenly reined up. Tamale also pulling sharply on his reins. They sat, not speaking, ears tuned to the night. From somewhere ahead came the faint bawling of cattle. A breeze that sprang up now carried the scent of moisture and night-wet grass.

"There's a valley or somethin' ahead. An' beef!" Tamale felt a little shiver run down his back at the way Quirk Bannister looked when he said that; shivered at the tones of hatred his voice held. And Tamale was a brave *hombre.* Yet, right now, with all the odds against them, he had rather have been Tamale, riding in friendship with this *gringo,* than Moxel, with a half hundred men at his back and call. . . . And Quirk against him.

They left their horses again. Ahead of them, the dark line of the night sky seemed to end over space. The rocks dropped

ooking down a hun-
ney could see small
there, they knew, was
. So this was where the
as held, and where Pancho's

e valley near the river
a silhouetted josh... ree kept to its eternal prayers, hangman's arms lifted to the sky. Stunted brush fought to hold on in the rocky walls down into the basin below them.

"Moxel will be watchin'," Quirk whispered. "But," his jaw set sternly, "that ain't makin' my cat hop no other way whatever. I come to get him—an', by God, I am!"

"A loco thing, *amigo*. But I, too, am loco," Tamale answered. "What if we took this Pancho an' Moxel away—alive? You could settle your score after we take them away. An' I could make that devil talk. *Si*, an' fin' what part this Aguirre plays, ridin' through the night! It is our only chance. Take them away from the other wolves. . . ."

"It will soon be breaking daylight," Quirk mumbled the words through lips that were drawn back into a terrible, wolfish snarl. "We go, *compañero*."

Carefully, they started down the side of the basin, alert for sentries or any trap Moxel might have set for them. They saw no one. Evidently Moxel and Pancho waited for them down there in the camp. Or, perhaps, Moxel expected Quirk to wait for him in Padre Diablo! Would he expect any *hombre* to try a thing like Quirk was trying now?

They gained the grassy floor of the basin and circled the rim of the bluff to come in behind the camp. Somewhere near, an owl hooted softly. Quirk stopped, crouched low. Over near the camp, pitched under a clump of cottonwoods on the side of the little spring creek that started and ended in the basin, another owl hooted answer to the first.

"We stuck our necks in the noose, *hombre*," Quirk said. "That wasn't no owl. It was them owl-hoot *hombres* of Pancho's and Moxel's. We walked right in."

"*Bueno*. Now, we mus' go ahead," Tamale whispered.

Rage seemed to burn like an all-consuming fire within Quirk as they dropped to their knees and started crawling swiftly toward the back of the few tents in the rebel-outlaw camp. Twice had Moxel tricked him. And now, he'd done it again.

If he could get one shot at Moxel—just get his hands on him, before they closed in. . . . They squatted behind a tent and carefully lifted the back drop. A smoky lantern burned dimly within. Faces turned to the tent wall, two men slept on cots within.

Quirk motioned to Tamale to watch. He wriggled under the tent. Outside, an entire flock of owl-hoot *hombres* had started their signal call. The mice were in the trap, and the owls were closing in.

Quirk leaned over to look in the face of one sleeping man. The fellow's arm shot up and circled Quirk's neck, and at the same time, a string of shots sounded back of the tent. Tamale's comic battle cries of Mexican oaths and gringo slang sounded shrill and defiant. Then Quirk's gun roared and the man clinging to him fell back on the cot.

Like a cat, Quirk wheeled and ducked. A knife sang so close that the breeze kissed his cheek like a breath of death—soft, sibilant and whispering of hell. Again his gun spat fire; white smoke clouded up from the barrel now, as Quirk thumbed the hammer until the shots rolled out as one. Men yelled and cursed and went down, and more poured into the tent. Quirk clubbed his gun and met them.

Outside there were sounds of another battle mingled with the hell inside the tent. "Hot tamale! Sap! Ha, you like that one on your beak? *Si?*"

Quirk used his feet; he butted with his head and struck out blindly with fist and clubbed gun. He was down under a sweaty, squirming mass that was crushing him by sheer weight of numbers. The tent ripped and came down on top of them. Snarling, a ball of bucking, man-killing rage, Quirk struggled on.

Men were holding down his legs. He couldn't kick any more. Someone brought a gun down across his head and opened up the old scalp wound again. Half stunned, but growling in his throat like some wild beast, Quirk still strained as they held him down. Men jerked the tent off the panting, cursing mob and they pulled Quirk to his feet.

FOUR men lay sprawled in grotesque positions in the wreck of the tent. They were still. Three others rolled and groaned in the agony of broken bones and smashed faces. Carrying the squirming Tamale, others came up. They had faces gashed with fingernails. One *hombre* whimpered and held his hand to where part of his ear had been bitten off. And Tamale's gun had accounted for two bandidoes that would never ride the Rio trail again.

"Welcome to our city—you lousy son!"

Eyes blazing, Quirk glared at Moxel, who swaggered up. A sudden kick, and he got one leg free. Moxel staggered back, mouth open, gagging for the wind that had been kicked out of him. He sobbed, then sat down on the ground, one sick *hombre*.

"I was—going t-to give you a chance," he gasped. "But now—by God, we'll let Pancho work on you. He knows lots of Yaqui tricks. It will be fun, to see you cringe; beg for a bullet through your head."

"You're a liar, you son of a hydrophoby polecat!" Quirk snarled. "You wouldn't dare face me with a gun. You—"

"Tie them up—out where they can taste the sun, *hombres,*" Moxel ordered. His face was the face of a maniac. A sick feeling possessed Quirk. Yaqui tricks. . . .

Bodily, they carried them out from under the trees. A stake was driven in the ground, and Tamale and Quirk, sitting down, back to back, were laced to this stake with fresh rawhide thongs that cut into the flesh. And when the heat of the day started shrinking that hide, it would cut in deeper. . . . deeper. . . .

And so it was that Quirk Bannister and Hot Tamale—otherwise Eduardo Estaban—saw another sunrise. Their last, they knew. But it wasn't the thought of dying that made them sicken. No, it was *how* they would die.

"Wherever Pancho is, I hope he ain't in no hurry gettin' back." Quirk tried to talk carelessly.

"An' me—I hope where he is in hell!" Tamale joked.

The day wore on.

VII

BURNING midday sun seemed to try frying the very souls out of their bodies. The rawh
cut deeper into tort
were swollen, and the
bleeding. Blood caked
Quirk's head and the world
dizzily before his eyes.

From under the tr
forty *hombres* lour
Quirk and Tamale turned their heads.

"Hell! A woman among this pack of wolves!" Quirk groaned. He shook his head to try and clear his swimming vision. The girl on the horse, now riding toward the camp, looked in their direction. Quirk gasped. It was the *señorita* whom Tamale had made love to in Padre Diablo!

Tamale groaned. But when he spoke, there was a new note of hope in his voice.

"I tol' you I did not know about her, sometime," he said.

"Then—" and for the first time since early the night before, Quirk thought of the rider who had followed them—"it was her back of us? Why?"

"My Manuelita is insis' on help me," Tamale said. "Her it was who tell me where Jose an' Roberto is, you see. She make frien' with Moxel, in Padre Diablo. *Madre de Dios*—she is twis' that *hombre* aroun' her finger! I tell her no; but a woman, *amigo,* does as she is please. Some day, we are hope to marry. Now, my little dove. . . ." Tamale groaned. He could not finish what he had started to say.

Quirk, wondering how the girl could help them, watched. She sprang off her horse and ran to Moxel, throwing her arms about him. Moxel pushed her away.

"What the hell you coming out here for?" he demanded. "It ain't safe, with this pack of dogs around."

"But"—Manuelita was close to him again—"I am not afraid, weeth my beeg Señor Wasp to protect leetle Manuelita. I mees you, an' long for you, *amio.* Please, you do not be cross weeth your Manuelita," she pleaded coaxingly.

"One-two kees. I go back and wait for you."

WASP'S chest swelled. Pretty hot, when a woman rode through miles of hell, just for a kiss. He hugged the girl to him, kissed her, then motioned her back to her horse.

"Ah, some seely *hombres* try to—what

...ey beesness weeth ...uelita pointed out ... weel speet in their ...

...rros!" Manuelita danced ...d men. "You make for ..., eh? Ay, I speet on you. I claw your e... out."

She darted in and raked her sharp nails down across Quirk's face. *"Sangre de Christo!"* She almost sobbed at the blood her scratches drew. "I am sorry, señor. But eet mus' be real." Quirk's expression told her he understood.

Moxel roared and gibed, from where he stood a dozen paces away, enjoying the show. Manuelita danced on around to Tamale. Tamale's back was to Moxel. The girl, spitting like a cougar, darted at the little Mexican. She slashed at him with her fingernails and mocked him.

As she bent low, a tiny stiletto slipped from her left hand and dropped between the two. Tamale wriggled his numb fingers and palmed the little blade.

"Ride. Make haste to the Federale camp," Tamale grunted, not moving his lips. "But—*Madre de Christo!*—do not let Aguirre see you. Tell Pedro—" He named his former *Rurale* companion, now a captain of Aguirre's—"to get his men and ride. But not let Aguirre know. Tell him to kill Aguirre if he is have to."

"Si," the girl hissed. Her eyes were hurt looking as she slashed out at Tamale once more, bringing the blood from his face. Then, she ran back and threw herself upon Moxel.

"See—eet is like that from me, when some *hombres* is try make foony weeth my Wasp. An' now, I go. *Adios,* my loved one." She kissed Moxel again, ran to her horse and quirted out on the trail, waving a gay good-bye.

MOXEL started to taunt Quirk. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a ragged bandido starting to slip into the saddle of a horse that stood beneath a tree.

A roaring gun and a puff of smoke from Moxel's hip. The hombre pitched backward to the ground—dead.

"You don't follow no woman of Wasp Moxel's!" Moxel roared. "Don't another dam' one of you move."

"That," Quirk muttered under his breath, "is one trick that we take. Moxel protects our messenger while she rides away."

"But there is little hope," Tamale answered him. "There is Aguirre to be considered. An' I am sure, *amigo,* he is in with Pancho. But Pedro will understan'. That is one reason he is made officer under Aguirre. No one can trus' the other one now, it seem."

"That sticker—get busy." Quirk told him. Tamale sighed answer. His numb, almost useless fingers dropped the knife. He groaned as he wriggled his fingers, trying to locate it.

"Dios," he almost cried, "I cannot fin' it."

"I got it," Quirk's longer fingers made it possible for him to pick the knife up off the ground between their backs. It was slow work; his fingers felt like things of wood—but wood that could feel great pain.

The last piece of binding rawhide fell away. Exquisite torture as blood slowly came back into the arms and hands of the two. Their hands were free, at last. But how much good would that do them? Well, they could at least make a break, which would bring a death by lead instead of torture. That was something.

If Pancho would wait until dark, they had a chance to get away into the night. Hope flamed afresh within them—then died a-borning. A shout arose in the camp.

"Pancho! *Viva* Pancho!" some marihuana-patriotic rebel called.

Quirk and Tamale watched the four men that rode down the trail. And now they knew who Pancho was! Pancho was General Aguirre himself! And Moxel, then, was his right-hand man!

"Aguirre knows me, very well," Tamale spoke quickly. "Hell will soon be on our tails—"

"Mebbe-so," Quirk answered. "Sooner than that, I'm thinkin'. Look—they're all crowdin' around them. Here. . . ."

Quirk jerked his hands free and slashed the loose strips that bound his ankles. He passed the knife to Tamale. They were on their feet and running as if the seven fiends were on their backs, heading for the shallow bank of the little stream. Ten yards—twenty—fifty—a yell sounded.

"Into the water! Hug the bank an' hold your face just above surface where the grass hangs into the stream!" Quirk

panted. He did not know what they might gain by this. But any chance was worth taking. They dived into the water, the pack in full cry behind.

VIII

IT was no use. The water was too clear; the stream was too shallow. It was more like an irrigation ditch than anything else. For a moment, they hugged close to the bank.

Yelling and shouting, one *hombre,* swifter than the rest, leaped over the bank. There was no hesitation. Tamale acted swiftly.

Like a dripping muskrat, he shot up out of the water. His arm moved and the stiletto flicked from his hand. Straight and true, it buried in the bandido's throat. The man strangled and tugged at the knife. Quirk caught him as he sagged forward, standing hip-deep in the water.

Tamale grabbed the rifle and stripped the criss-crossed shell belts off of him. Quirk wrenched the dead man's six-gun from the holster. He turned, and the gun spouted a lethal stream of lead. Two men, who had jumped the bank, seemed to halt in mid-air. Kicking, arms spread wide, they fell into the water. Like a duck, Tamale was under. He came back up with another belt of cartridges that fitted the gun Quirk had.

Another man cleared the bank. He, too, made that queer half-stop in mid-air, before he dropped, struggling out his life, into the muddied little stream.

Moxel's voice; the voice of Aguirre, screaming out orders. Men ran down the creek and crossed far below Quirk and Tamale. They were like fish in a horse trough. But they had guns. They could go out fighting like men. Quirk croaked out a stream of fighting-mad curses and squatted in the water until only his head was above the surface. Tamale turned and faced the other bank, aping his gringo friend.

IT was a grim game of hell-divers they were playing. Like the elusive mud ducks, dodging lead on a pond, they went on with the game. A head appeared over the bank; Quirk fired, and Tamale's rifle joined the chorus. Someone groaned and thrashed about in [illegible] hung halfway ove[illegible] drip-dripped steadily, [illegible] trail in the water below.

Streaks of red began to [illegible] as the game went on. Th[illegible] down. If they could [illegible] longer! Luck had b[illegible] with them, so far. But now, it changed.

"Every man—at once. Get them out. Fools! A thousand pesos to the man who gets them. All of you—now!" Aguirre's voice rose to a hissing fury as he drove his men on to a massed charge. And that was what the two men—the human hell-divers—had been fearing. Now, they stood up in the water, grimly determined to make a last stand fitting for their kind.

Shots sounded in a furious rattle; men shouted and yelled. They plunged over the creek bank in a frantic swarm. Carefully, grimly, Quirk fired; Tamale's rifle bolt click-clacked steadily. Horribly comic, the way they sprawled, splashing into the stream that now ran red.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, it ended. Men cried out and raised trembling hands above their heads; the pound of horses over the ground, a few scattered shots. Wide-mouthed, Quirk and Tamale stood holding their hot, empty guns, wondering. . . .

"Fire!" a crisp command was heard. Rifles crashed. A dozen of the rebel band sagged down in limp heaps. But few were left, at that. And now, as the rifles spoke again, they too went down. Merciless? Perhaps. But such is the fate of rebels.

"Pedro!" Tamale was clawing his way up the bank. "Pedro, *amigo!*"

TAMALE and Pedro embraced. But Quirk had no time for such. He was filling his empty gun again—just in case. He cussed and emptied that gun again. Far down the stream, toward the trail into Buzzard Barrens, two men spurred out of a willow clump. Low over the necks of their mounts, they spurred and quirted away. Lead rained around them, but luck smiled on them. Aguirre and Moxel rode into the jumbled rocks on the basin rim and disappeared toward Padre Diablo.

Again the evening crashed to the beat of running horses. Federale *soldados,* good riders they were, fogged the trail behind

ney weren't fiends.
t Quirk Bannister
de at Quirk's side.
eadily, they pulled ahead of

d early daybreak as they
hind them. Another
irk suddenly kneed
his laboring horse off across the sandy flatlands. He would miss Padre Diablo, that way.

"You go wrong, *compañero,*" Tamale called.

"I go right," Quirk answered. "They dare not stop in Padre Diablo. Pedro will heal that sore spot. They have one hope—the American side. This is the shortest. It'll cut off near eight miles. Moxel will head for Rancho Rio crossin', to beat it to his place below mine. *Amigo,* we mebbe-so will be waitin' for them there!"

Tamale swore joyfully as they tried to urge more speed out of their tired mounts.

The fringe of the river showed ahead. Swiftly, half fearfully, they rode down the long, sloping bank. No tracks there. They stood in the stirrups and looked back. Long, anxious minutes. Then, two specks appeared, heading for the river.

Quirk snapped his cigaret down. He made sure his gun was loose in the leather, then leaned forward, lips drawn down at the corners, his eyes blazing behind slitted lids. Tamale licked his lips and held his rifle crosswise across the pommel of his hull. Like men, they would give those other devils a chance.

Sound of heaving horses; hoofs on the rocks coming down the bank. "Another minute, and we'll be across. Get fresh horses at my place and—"

"But you ain't across, Moxel!"

Moxel's mouth flew open. He seemed to believe he was seeing apparitions. Then he snarled a curse and went for his gun. This was one time Quirk Bannister had taken a trick!

Aguirre, his gun drawn, toppled backward in the saddle. Tamale watched him slip to the ground. That was that!

OTHER guns roared. Moxel's gun was spouting lead. Hard shooting from the back of a plunging horse. But that wasn't it. It was the muscle, the reaction of a trained gunman, that caused him to empty his gun; empty it into the air. For Moxel had been that fraction too slow with his draw. Something had smashed his chest and jarred him like a blow of a giant hammer. His horse ran into the river. Moxel's arms flung wide, and he pitched into the water.

Once again the Rio Grande ran red with killer's blood.

QUIRK sat his horse on the river bank. Tamale and Manuelita reined their horses beside him. They watched a string of cattle take the water from the Mexican side.

"Not all of your R-R cows were there left. So my government make that up to you. We write the papers, explaining the brands, and give to you much other cows what is in Buzzard Barren basin."

Quirk's eyes widened. More than five hundred head had come streaming across the river. Still, they came on. "Hell—what's this?" he demanded.

Tamale chuckled. "We fin' six-eight hundred head more. You take—sabe? My poor government love *gringo* what is like you. If that is not enough—" Tamale spread his hands wide Quirk could not answer. He gripped the little Mexican's hand tightly. Hell—this would make him. It paid for everything, and much more to boot.

"An' you, you hot tamale," Quirk managed to smile at last. "What do you get out of this?"

"Me?" Tamale laughed happily. "In these two weeks you have been fixin' you one house, I have been on what you call sugar—no, honey—moon. My little dove, she is get what she save."

Manuelita bent swiftly and kissed her husband as she leaned toward him from the saddle. "He ees get big job weeth government, too," she stated proudly.

"I'm not the hombre what Señor Quirk is," Tamale said. "But, anyhow, I'm one *diablo* weeth the *señoritas.* What you call —lady-keeler. No?"

"Yes!" Quirk laughed, his cup of happiness flooding over.

It seemed the gurgling river laughed too. Debts had been paid. The Rio ran clear once more.

"Keep right on moving, Mister Sheriff!" she ordered harshly. "I'm not hankering to plug you, but the less I see of you, the healthier you'll be!"

PILGRIM ON THE PROD

By BART CASSIDY

Dogie was his name—his brand was *Trouble.* Pinon's toughest trigger-trio couldn't match his Colt skill. Yet a Winchester-slinging wench stampeded him off the range.

A TALL, weather-scarred rider rode through sweet-smelling pines to the top of the Saw-Tooth ridge. He stopped to survey the distant twinkling lights of Piñon, then leaned forward on the pommel of his saddle, eyes squinting.

"Laddie," he patted his horse's neck thoughtfully with affection, "I reckon we've lost our trail, but if we follow that draw, it will lead to those lights!"

ig chaps with the
is knowing horse
of the mountain.
ssly, he weaved in and out
dense jack pines and cedars.
he dusk and the charm of
e soul of the adventurer
oke for... nto a song:

"Some went South when the Cuban 'rose;
"Some went North to the Yukon snows;
"Some went West to the Golden Gate;
"From Hwang Ho to Magellan Strait!
"Seeking all—!"

Something struck his hat. Then the deafening explosion of a gun split the air and his song died in his throat. He had come to a small clearing in the timber and through the dusk he could see a small cabin on the far side. His eyes roamed the timber for his attacker and his hand dropped to the butt of his .45.

"Claw the air, Mister!" The voice came from behind a drooping cedar nearby.

He raised his hands slowly even with his shoulders, and gasped as a slip of a girl came from behind the tree with a carbine poised for action.

"What's your brand!" she demanded, stopping fifteen feet away.

"No brand," he smiled easily, "just a maverick."

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Been called everything that ain't fit for a lady to hear," he replied lightly, "but down in Arizona, they call me 'Dogie.'"

"Be you a sheriff?"

"Hell—er—I mean, no mam!" he stuttered.

"One of Blackie Thomas' gang?"

"Never heard of him." Dogie shook his head.

"Well, maybe I'm wrong but I got to be careful."

She half lowered her rifle. "Git moving out of this draw and if you see any of those spavined, wind-broken buckaroos of Fanner Martin's, you tell 'em Bess Calder's just itching to greet them with her .30-30!"

"I'll do that," Dogie laughed at her vehemence, "if you can tell me the trail I take so I won't meet any more ladies with a grudge and a carbine!"

"The trail's about a half mile to your right," she broke into a smile, "and if you'll quit yowling like a sick coyote, the ladies won't know you're coming!"

"I always sing when I'm hungry," Dogie grinned and started off, tipping his hat.

"I'll have chow in half an hour, if you're in no hurry to get to Piñon," she suggested.

"Trust me?" he asked.

"No!" she shook her head, "but I can draw and shoot as fast as any man in the Saw-Tooth country!"

"I believe that," Dogie laughed. "Where's your camp?"

"Just head for that shack," she pointed, "I'll follow."

THIRTY minutes later, he sat down to a tempting meal before as pretty a girl as he ever hoped to meet. He appraised her in quick darting glances and, though she paid him but casual attention, he noticed she still wore a small pearl-handled gun about her waist. After the second cup of steaming coffee, he broke the silence.

"Excuse me," he began, "but is it Miss or Mrs.?"

She looked at him wide-eyed for a full minute.

"I don't know," her voice almost broke, "I guess it's Mrs.!"

"If you don't mind, then, I'll just call you 'Bess.'" He realized he had blundered into something. "You mentioned several of the population around here. Won't you tell me about them?"

"You're a stranger?" she asked.

"Yep," he nodded, "from Arizona."

"Why?" she queried.

"Oh, just drifting," he shrugged, "looking for a greener range."

"Or a strange sheriff!" she put in meaningly.

"You mentioned Blackie Thomas' gang," Dogie went on, ignoring the last. "Who are they—rustlers?"

"Road-agents and murderin' coyotes!" she snapped. "They've run all the honest men out of the Saw-Tooth country!"

"And Fanner Martin?" he asked.

"Him?" She pushed back her chair, her eyes gleaming with hatred. "He runs the Owl Saloon, the sheriff, and Blackie Thomas!"

"A bad hombre, eh?" Dogie whistled.

"Bad? He's rotten!" she gritted. "The only man in western Montana that fans his gun!"

"And where do you come in?" he asked.

"I don't come, I'm here!" she snapped, "and the first one of that bunch that crosses the sight of this carbine is going to Hell with his boots on!"

"Whew!" he whistled, "tell me, Bess, maybe I can help!"

"I ain't asking help!" she replied quickly.

"Then help me by telling me what I'm riding into," he suggested. "If you help me, then I'll help you without asking!"

He began to slowly roll a cigarette as she scrutinized him from head to foot. Finding her analysis satisfactory, she began.

"Three months ago, my husband and I had a nice little homestead two miles this side of Piñon." Her voice was low with suppressed emotion. "In summer, we farmed, and in winter, we came up here and ran a trap line. Fanner Martin came to Piñon and opened the Owl, and on his heels came Blackie and his gang of coyotes! Sheriff Doheny was shot chasing the rustlers, and Martin's bartender, Olson, was made sheriff! Then Hell started right!"

She stopped and averted her eyes from Dogie's admiring gaze. He started guiltily and re-lit his cigarette.

"And Blackie's gang run you off your place?" he supplemented.

"They did not!" she returned. "It's Martin! For some reason, he took a dislike to Tom, my husband, and when he couldn't run him, he killed him!"

"He did!" Dogie leaned forward.

"Oh, not openly!" she sneered. "He'd crawl around making believe he was doing you a favor even when he was doing his dirtiest work! Tom was up here looking over his traps one day and stumbled on to the sheriff and Blackie, drinking together by a spring. He returned to Piñon and tried to form a Vigilante. One of Martin's men came out of the Owl pretending he was drunk and shot him in the back!"

"And they let him go?" Dogie asked.

"They tried him but he escaped and joined Blackie!"

"And the sheriff?"

"He's still sheriff!" she shot meaningly.

"Then you moved up here?"

"Not until Ma[illegible] pronounced!" she [illegible]

"You mean he [illegible] Dogie queried bluntly.

"No!" she said in a bitter v[illegible] wanted me! Told me he'd k[illegible] or later anyway. He a[illegible] wanted!"

"Hm—I wonder!" Dogie muse[illegible] arose. "Well, I must be going."

He extended his hand as she got up.

"Thanks for the real meal, Bess." He took her left hand as she stretched it out, timidly keeping her right near her gun. "It looks like Piñon needs a house cleaning and maybe I can do it!"

"It ain't a one man job," she warned him. "Martin is too strong!"

"Ain't there any honest ranchers here?" he asked.

"Some," she replied, "but he's got them fooled!"

"I might wake 'em up," he grinned. "So long, and perhaps I'll come back with some supplies for you."

She looked at him and a half smile broke upon her face as she held up her hand in protest.

"You can't live without grub!" he went on, "and it may not be safe for you to go to town!"

"I'm not afraid!" she returned quickly.

"Well, I may want another meal," he laughed as he turned toward the door, "and I don't want to wait for another invite!"

"I'm sorry I punctured your hat." She smiled at him.

"I'm not!" he returned her smile and shut the door.

THE noisy crowd was at its height when Dogie rode up to the brilliantly lighted Owl Resort. He paused in the doorway and smiled on the scene of rough amusement. Girls with too-red cheeks wheedled drinks from dusty buckaroos and somewhere a tinny piano kept time to the musical clink of silver on the polished bar. On the opposite side of the room, solemn-faced men silently watched the fall of the cards in the stud games.

Dogie caused no interest as he casually approached the bar and ordered his drink. He drifted to the poker tables and, after watching a few hands, accepted the dealer's invitation to sit in. His luck was in-

...w hands, he felt ...en the dealer and ...ght. Betting ran ... and the dealer, a swarthy, ...ambler, was by far the heav... Dogie watched him keenly ... crooked work.

... particu... heavy win from the flo...an, the dealer raked in the pot and began to deal. Dogie stopped it on the first card.

"Bring us a new deck!" he demanded and began gathering up the cards.

"The deal is started!" snapped the dealer.

"I want a new deck!" Dogie rapped.

"So do I!" put in the florid man.

The dealer shrugged and summoned a waiter while Dogie picked up the cards on the table. He began to slowly count them one by one.

"There are fifty-two cards in a poker deck in Piñon, stranger!" the dealer shot meaningly.

"I was just wondering," Dogie smiled as he counted.

"Every game in the Owl is run on the square!" he continued darkly.

"Aw, Hell, you made me lose my count!" Dogie snorted.

The entire room turned to watch the table with interest. The florid man watched Dogie and the dealer like a cat, while the other players slid their chairs back with their hands close to their guns.

"I say there are fifty-two cards in that deck!" The dealer's eyes narrowed.

"And I'm going to count them!" Dogie returned.

There was a loud report and the playing cards scattered into the air. A second explosion followed closely upon the first and the dealer staggered back with a shattered hand. Two of the other players leaped to their feet with their guns in their hands. Dogie swung his .45 at one, with his thumb still on the hammer; and the florid man snapped his gun across the table at the other.

"Don't get hurt!" advised the florid man. "This isn't your branding party!"

"What's the row?" boomed Martin as he stamped across the floor.

DOGIE coolly looked over this six foot of menacing humanity and raised his brows.

"Your dealer is carrying a hold-out!" he smiled.

"He is?" growled the big man. "How do you know?"

"Jerk that coat!" Dogie waved his gun.

One of the crowd stepped forward and slipped the wounded man's coat to the floor. From a harness-like strap on his shoulder, hung a long elastic. On the end of this was a clamp which held five cards.

"Get out!" Martin glowered at the cowering dealer. "If you're in Piñon in the morning—you're a dead man!

"The house will stand your losses!" he announced to the players, "and you, young man, come with me!"

He turned abruptly and strode to his office in the front of the building. Dogie smiled, jammed his gun in his holster, and followed.

"It's not what we do that stretches our neck," Martin began as he closed the door, "but what we get caught at!"

"If you don't do anything, you don't get caught," Dogie returned.

"Agreed," Martin shrugged. "What's your name?"

"Dogie."

"Riding for who?"

"Just drifting." Dogie fished for tobacco.

Martin's gold gray eyes scrutinized him from head to foot, not overlooking the steadiness of his hands as he rolled his cigarette.

"I notice your gun has no trigger." He bent forward with half-closed eyes.

"I like to fan 'em in a crowd," Dogie laughed, "or thumb 'em for speed!"

"Where'd you come from?" Martin asked.

"Texas," Dogie drawled and appeared to resent this questioning.

"I have the reputation for being the only fanner in Montana!" Martin continued.

"Reckon the state's big enough for two," Dogie returned lightly.

"It is or it isn't!" snapped Martin. "That's up to you!"

"What do you mean?" Dogie's body grew tense.

"How'd you like to deal that stud game?"

"No, thanks!" laughed the puncher. "I might rustle a steer or sage-brush a stage, but deal stud—no, sir! I can't shoot with a handful of cards!"

"If you work for me, Dogie," Martin went on, "Montana can support two gun fanners!"

"I'm not hankering to shoot it out with you," Dogie grinned. "What else have you?"

"How'd you like to be sheriff?" Martin leaned forward.

"That's better," Dogie nodded. "Can you do it?"

"Hell! I run this country!" Martin snorted. "I'll have Olson make you deputy tomorrow and then we'll find a way to make him resign!"

"I'll be there." Dogie waved and started toward the door.

"Don't forget you're working for me!" warned the big man, "or there'll only be one of us in Montana!"

"One thing I never do," Dogie shot back, "is *to forget!*"

DOGIE had worn his deputy sheriff badge one uneventful week. Outside of the decided hostility of his superior officer all Piñon greeted him with cool disdain. It was plain that no one questioned Fanner Martin's assumptive leadership.

Finally Dogie tired of the inactivity and, purchasing a few supplies, rode off unqusetioned into the hills.

He was descending a tiny canyon, thickly timbered on both sides, with a tiny creek bubbling at the bottom. His horse stopped once and snorted. He prodded him gently on, but a few steps farther, he repeated the action.

"What's the matter, Laddie?" he crooned, looking about.

The faint odor of burning cedar came to him and he scratched his head thoughtfully.

"No timber fire," he mused to himself. "Coming up the draw! Maybe I'd better look-see!"

He dismounted and threw his reins over a pine branch. Slipping forward like an Indian, he noiselessly covered about a quarter of a mile. The odor grew stronger and he finally came in sight of three men before a small fire beside the creek. They were talking earnestly as they ate, and Dogie worked his way forward unseen. He reached an elder-berry bush fifteen feet from the first and their voices came to him clearly.

"Well!" snort
do this job as I
now!"

Dogie parted t.e bushe
ognized the speaker as Olso
officer.

"What's eating you?"
the others. "You're ..ig you
you?"

"Yeah," drawled Olson, "now ..am, but Martin's double-crossing me, and anyway this stick-up goes, I'm the goat!"

"Listen, Bullie!" put in the other, "there will be easy fifty thousand in that bank for the mine payroll! You'd wipe a hell of a lot of glasses for five thousand in some saloon!"

"All right, but you got to pull something to lead me and that deputy off," he went on, "or Martin'll have me in a jack-pot! That's final!"

He arose abruptly, and Dogie let the bushes close. The other two men got up and the speaker continued.

"Keep your shirt buttoned, Bullie," he went on. "We'll talk it over and let you know before tomorrow night. I ain't saying Martin ain't after your hide, but in the same breath, I don't aim to face his gun fanning!"

They were approaching the bush and Dogie started to get to his feet. One foot struck a mossy rock and he fell heavily to the ground.

"What was that!" Olson cried.

On they came and Dogie warily circled the bush.

"Out of there, you rattler!" snarled one of the bandits as he sent a shot crashing into the bush.

Dogie stepped out from the opposite side with his gun leveled.

"Reach for the moon, gents!" he advised.

They turned simultaneously and stared into his steady .45.

"Sorry to interrupt your party," he grinned, as his thumb rocked the hammer back and forth, "but now I'm here, just pile your hardware on the ground over there!"

He waved his gun to one side, indicating a log. Olson thought he had the advantage and swung his gun into action. There were three shots in rapid succession. Olson's bullet grazed Dogie's shoul-

g lodged in the
it drew his gun
took part of his
third ... slipped behind
escaped when the bandit
lf bodily at Dogie. Dogie
de and let him rush by.
and ... saw a knife flash in
and. His thumb tripped the
hammer once more and the bandit fell to the ground with a grunt.

"Ugh! Snakes!" Dogie grunted as he stepped behind the bush again and re-filled his gun, "I better make tracks for Piñon!"

THE sun was sinking in the West amid a blaze of gold as Dogie rode into view of Piñon. He stopped on the trail and his brow puckered thoughtfully.

"Looks like we'll be moving again, Laddie," he whispered to his horse. "Killing their pet sheriff in company with the road-agents may not be to Martin's liking. Maybe, we'd better finish up our work and trail back to Phoenix!"

He clicked his tongue and the big sorrel moved down the trail.

Entering the town, he rode directly to the Owl, dropped his reins over the hitch-rack, and dismounted. He noticed several loungers gaze at him interestedly and he swung his holster within easy reach as he entered the saloon. A full dozen of Martin's henchmen were scattered through the crowd at the bar. The buzz of conversation automatically stopped as he entered. He walked leisurely to the far end of the bar and ordered his drink. When the bartender set it before him, he leaned forward.

"Tell Martin I want to see him!" he remarked coolly.

The man shot him a quick glance and turned away without a reply. Dogie watched him as he disappeared into Martin's private office. He downed his drink as if he was unaware of being the center of interest. Martin's door opened and the big gunman stood in his shirt sleeves surveying the room. His bone-handled .45 was shoved in his waist-band and his right arm, bent at the elbow, allowed his hand to hang within easy reach of the gun. He walked to the center of the room with arrogant self-assurance.

"Well?" he boomed, looking at Dogie.

"Well?" Dogie echoed softly.

"You want to see me?" Martin asked.

"Maybe you'd rather we'd meet privately," Dogie returned.

"No!" he growled, "what I have to say, I want the whole country to hear!"

Dogie left the bar and the crowd edged away, leaving the two fighters facing each other in the center of the room.

"All right!" he snapped with narrowing eyes, "spit it out!"

"You killed two of my men!" Martin shot his jaw forward aggressively.

"I beat them to the trigger!" Dogie replied.

"I told you that I run this country!" the big man went on with his rage mounting. "When I want you to kill someone, I'll tell you!"

"And I told you I never forget!" Dogie returned steadily.

"You forgot this time!" snapped Martin, "and I'm going to make an example of you!"

"Just a minute!" Dogie flung his left hand forward with his finger pointing accusingly, "before you start fanning that gun, I have something to say!"

"Your last will and testament will be appreciated!" Martin sneered.

"Three years ago, I swore I'd get you, Martin!" he began. "That's after you married my sister in Tucson, then killed her!"

The other started visibly and a gleam of hatred opened his eyes.

"Oh, you never knew me!" Dogie went on, I've trailed you to every woman you killed for three years! You'll never get Calder's wife, you rat! Go for your gun!"

Dogie made a swift leap to one side and the two guns roared as one. The spectators were paralyzed by the lightning-like speed with which the gunmen fanned their hammers. Dogie, with his gun-hand steadied on his hip, fanned three shots and felt a twinge in his side. The smoke cleared and he saw Martin falling to the floor with an ugly dark hole between his eyes. Like a cat, he glided toward the door, his thumb holding the hammer on his gun. One of Martin's men made a foolish slap for his gun and Dogie let the hammer fall. The man slid to the floor with a grunt and Dogie backed out the door.

Outside, he leaped on his horse and vanished into the fast approaching night. Be-

hind, there was a mad scramble for horses and, amid random shots and curses, the pursuers took up the chase.

Straight into the mountains, Dogie rode, with Martin's men close on his heels. Down his side, he could feel the warm trickle of blood from the resting place of Martin's slug. His nerves were numbed but began to pain with every movement in the saddle. He gritted his teeth and pushed on over the trail.

He swung off into the timber and took a short-cut to Calder's cabin. The moon had come up bright and full and he rode boldly into the clearing up to the shack. He leaned over in the saddle and knocked on the door with his gun. The window slid back a trifle.

"Bess!" he called, "it's Dogie!"

"You want me to plug you?" she cried angrily, "get away from here and stay away. I've heard what a little tin sheriff you are. Now get!"

"I'm getting!" he replied. "Never coming back! Just wanted to tell you I got Blackie, Olson and Martin! They won't bother you any more!"

He heard her gasp, then the thunder of pursuit came from above.

"Here they come!" he laughed, "good bye, Bess!"

"Dogie!" she cried, but he had dashed into the night.

TWENTY-FOUR hours later a rider, slumped over the horn of his saddle, rode weakly into Jefferson, Wyoming. Willing hands before the hotel assisted him to the ground. He groaned with the exertion and his hand sought his blood-clotted side.

"Get me a saw-bones!" he mumbled and slipped into unconsciousness.

They carried him to the hotel and summoned a doctor. The medical man extracted the slug in his side and turned to the solicitous crowd.

"A lucky man!" he announced, "an inch either way would have been fatal! He'll be around in a few days!"

"Wonder how far he rode with that?" one put in. "Must have been quite a ways, cause his horse was all in!"

"Who is he?" another questioned. "Road-agent or just a buckaroo?"

Dogie was obl
his jangled nerves
selves in his unc

IT was broad daylight when
his eyes. He looked ar
quizzically and tried t
in his side made him
his teeth and slid w
swayed drunkenly as he sought
dow. Below, he saw several horsemen ride up, and the fear of the pursued struck his heart. He looked around for his gun. It was gone. He dressed himself unsteadily and made for the window. Weakness overtook him and he collapsed. As he tried to rise, the door opened and the room seemed filled with men.

"It's him all right!" one cried.

"You got me, gents!" he smiled wanly.

His arm gave away and he slid to the floor again.

"Dogie!" a woman's voice called. Then a gentle hand raised his head.

"Bess!"

He opened his eyes and stared wonderingly into hers.

"This isn't Martin's posse!" she smiled happily, "it's mine!"

"Yours?" he echoed.

"Yes, mine!" she repeated "You said you'd wake up the honest men in Piñon and you did! After I heard the details of your fight with Martin, I kept them awake!"

"But I don't understand!" he exclaimed.

"Don't try to now," she laughed. "Just get this much: We've given Martin's gang twenty-four hours to get out of the country and have come after you for sheriff . . . to see that they do!"

"I ain't much good now," he sighed as he closed his eyes wearily.

"I'll nurse you back in no time!" she promised.

"You will?" he asked eagerly.

She nodded boldly with shining eyes.

"Then saddle up my bronc!" he cried. "I'm going to be Piñon's invalid sheriff for life!"

She bent over and kissed him lightly on the cheek, and the crowd cheered lustily. Eager hands assisted him to his feet and started him on his way back to the Saw-Tooth Mountains.

BUSCADERO BRAND

By EDGAR L. COOPER

Keno Curry was steel-tough. Steel-tough and slate-hard. But deep in Rio Red's dark Mountains of the Ghost, where conch-horns wailed the approach of prowling men, even the toughest hombres had a way of *adios*-ing in gunsmoke.

A Swift Novel of the Big Bend Country

"GRAB a cloud! Pronto!"

Hoose, the city-bred chauffeur, who was driving the powerful, open touring car, jerked his eyes from the shale landslide that blocked the mountain road in front. He looked square into the ugly muzzle of a black Colt .45 thrust not three inches from his right ear. A man had stepped from behind a boulder that stood on the off side of the road. He was a tall, jetty-eyed, hawk-faced individual with a sweat-stained Stetson pulled low over his brow. He smiled crookedly at the startled expression on Hoose's face.

"Pay attention now," he muttered, "and mebbe you'll eat somethin' besides sand for breakfast. . . ."

The loud snapping smash of an automatic, toward the rear of the open car, cut short his admonition. A woman screamed frantically. A man grunted hoarsely—once.

The chauffeur flung a terrified glance into the rear vision mirror, in front and above the steering wheel, and saw a second man

standing back on the road, pistol in hand. He saw, too, that the rather English-looking man, whom he had picked up at noon at the railroad station, in company with the two women, had slumped sidewise—and even as Hoose looked, the man tumbled forward, slid to the bottom of the car.

"Snappy gunnin', Hype," the hawk-faced man called back. "One more dude bites the dust."

"Yeh! He was just gonna get flip."

The slim killer in the back nodded. A hollow-cheeked, hollow-eyed rat he was, with slitted lids and crooked lips, his features the color of dirty putty. He stuck his automatic in a coat pocket, shook out a cloth and small sack with his left hand, took a tiny phial from his vest pocket and emptied its liquid contents upon the cloth pad. A sweetish, pungent odor rose above the clean smell of piñon and juniper. The ratty youth called Hype spat the stub of a cigaret from his mouth and ground it beneath his shoe.

A SCRAI[illegible] came from the shale. [illegible]rked his eyes away from the rea[illegible]rror. He saw a huge, red-bearded ma[illegible] picking his way across the slide on stilt-heeled cowboy boots. In his fist, held negligently, was a long-[illegible]ix-gu[illegible]

[illegible]awk-faced man heard him and [illegible]ithout turning. Redbeard walked up to [illegible]ar. His golden eyes roved over the two women. His massive head nodded, just perceptibly.

What happened then did not take one minute.

Hype suddenly jumped on the running-board and leaned toward the back seat. Without warning he jerked his cloth bag over the head of the youngest of the two women. A stifled scream and the drug-impregnated pad knocked her out with grim swiftness. Apparently she had been taken entirely unawares for she made no resistance.

Hoose had noticed her ever since she had gotten off the train. He had watched her slyly through the mirror. Young, slender, black-headed, with very red lips and very white teeth. Eyes that flashed and laughed and were the color of gray pansies. One of the prettiest girls Hoose had ever seen in all his born days.

One minute she had been sitting there, bending over the murdered man, wide-eyed, white of lip; the next she was being carried across the squeaking shale by the hawk-faced ruffian. The youth called Hype walked backward just behind them, his gun weaving like a rattler's head, in his left hand the girl's heavy fur coat and small bag.

"Good work, boys," rumbled Redbeard. "Put her in our bus, Blackie."

He stood close to the shivering chauffeur, his eyes, yellow and savage as a puma's, bent on the woman who sat with fingers pressed against bloodless cheeks, staring at the man at her feet. A puddle of red grew on the rug at the bottom of the car.

"Good night, friends," said Redbeard with a bow and a cruel smile. "Make yourselves comfortable, for I figure you two'll be in this part of the Puertacitas for quite a while."

The harsh voice of the fellow called Blackie broke into the suave, taunting address. "Tug's shooting at somebody back on the hill," he called. "Let's get goin' chief. Everything's all set—all jake."

"Ah, so? Then vamoose is right," said Redbeard briskly. *"Buenas noches."*

He spun on his heel—his arm rose high and fell in a quick, chopping arc. The barrel of his pistol landed with a dull smack against the side of Hoose's head and the chauffeur pitched against the steering wheel, unconscious. It was a brutal, lightning-like blow, wholly uncalled for. With a laugh Redbeard turned and tramped across the shale.

The engine of a powerful automobile, concealed by the shoulder of the hill, roared. Gears rasped. The motor echoed like thunder inside the steep-walled valley. The fast striding dusk threw a blanket over the gruesome scene.

KENO CURRY, Border-born and bred, was used to split-second thinking and acting, for many times his adventurous life had depended upon it. So the whistling snap of the high-power bullet which crashed through the windshield edge of his coupé was not out of his ears before he had jerked on the emergency brake, disengaged the gears, and dived like a kingfisher out the right hand door. He yanked his rifle from its scabbard beside him as he went.

Slaty eyes narrowed, thin lips taut, he crouched behind the fender and stared over the hood of the car. The bullet had come from somewhere ahead and to the left of the road, for it struck the edge of the right windshield post and shattered the glass before passing on. That hogbacked ridge up there offered any number of spots to hide a drygulcher. But what was the big idea, anyhow?

Keno knew of nobody out in that neck of the woods who had it in for him bad enough to want to salivate him on sight—without even saying howdy-do or gimme a match. He had driven that day from Del Rio, and wanted to make Marfa before night, where he was to meet the Yeager boys and join them in a week's hunt at their ranch, south of Marfa in the Chinatis. But Keno Curry was also wise to the Texas Border, and knew that many queer things happened along those lonely roads.

He raised his head slowly—a vicious zip, and the lead slug tore through his Stetson, tunneling his hair so close to the scalp that

the skin stung. And hard on the echo of the distant rifle's spang came a third bullet, which snarled above the car hood like ripping canvas. With a gritted curse, Keno threw himself flat in the road, snaked beneath the car, and thrust his rifle barrel between the wires of the left front wheel.

His sharp eyes had caught a sign of movement up there on the ridge—up near the summit between two cleft rocks. So that's where the son was holed up, huh? Flecks of orange glinted in Keno's slaty eyes as they drilled into the rock cleft, alert for the first chance movement. His finger was taut on the trigger. It was a difficult target, that spot—upward at an angle of over thirty degrees, and the light was almost gone. Twenty minutes more and it would be dusk. But Keno Curry waited grimly, motionless as a lobo wolf, his eyes like a cat's in the dark.

The seconds ticked away. The ridge became steeped in blue shadow; the crest of the opposite hill glowed dully as if one looked through ruby glass at the pines that topped it. A shell-pink glow stained the low west, and the wind whistled like a banshee down the arroyo and swale and canyon, its chill biting through clothes and skin like acid. The sky, cloudless, as yet, was brushed a scuddy gray by the howling blast and a star or two gleamed palely. Every second it was getting colder. The blue Texas norther was dry yet but any moment it might veer and become a wet blizzard. Keno knew his Texas in November.

Still no further movement up on the ridge. Keno wormed from beneath the coupé, worked his way cautiously to the rear, inched to his feet and looked about. Listening, he thought he heard the faint, far distant drone of a motor—a sound so faint it was just a ghost, almost instantly gone. A frown creased Keno's forehead as he set his rifle against the rear fender and thoughtfully built a cigarette. It looked mighty like that sniper had done his darnedest to stop the car, for some reason or other, and hadn't been a bit particular whether the driver got salivated in the process or not. But once his mission was accomplished, he had vamoosed. Something smelly was going on up the road, Keno knew not what.

For a moment longer he peered about before getting back into his luggage-loaded coupé. It was six [illegible] months since he had been through t[illegible] of the country, but Keno Curry kn[illegible]ig Bend as well as he did the Slas[illegible] Ranch on the Pecos, where he was *segundo* to Tex Tolliver, boss and owner. And he knew that in that particular vicinity there was not a ranch [illegible] —nor even a squalid Mex hut, fo[illegible]

It was a savagely desolate re[illegible] parallel rock-and-scrub studded r[illegible]ges, arated by narrow arroyos and canyons, with the ribbon of road climbing like a mountain goat trail. One of the wildest, toughest sections of the Lone Star, and flanking the Rio.

Keno Curry wasn't surprised when, after he had resumed his journey and rounded the curving hill, he discovered the stranded touring car.

HOOSE had come to by then. The woman in the rear still stared at the dead man at her feet, as if in a trance.

So that was why the sniper was slinging lead at him, thought Keno. A rear guard lookout, posted up on the ridge to halt any travelers. Likely a second one had been stationed on the opposite hogback, covering the Marfa road.

"What's up," Keno demanded of the dazed chauffeur.

Hoose hurriedly told him what had happened.

"Where were you taking them?" asked Keno.

"Mr. Murry sent me to bring these people to his hunting lodge up at Sierra Blanca. He's giving a house party."

"There won't be much party," Keno said, looking at the woman whom he figured correctly to be the wife of the murdered man. "Who was the girl, do you know?"

The chauffeur told him. She was Beverly Meagher, daughter of Major General Sawney Meagher, commander of Fort Bliss at El Paso.

Keno Curry whistled softly. Old "Hard Case's" girl, huh? There would be hell afloat and the river rising about this, alright! The old boy would move heaven and earth to get her back and tend to the perpetrators, but it was likely to prove a big order. Keno knew the Bend, and he knew American red tape. And from the vague descriptions the chauffeur gave him of the three bandits—well, Keno thought

he had a pretty [illegible] a of who they were also.

A big, red b[illegible]ellow with yellow eyes, six feet two o[illegible] called chief. A tall, swarthy, hawk-faced gent, slightly stoop shouldered, who went by the name [illegible]kie. A slim, pasty-faced youth with [illegible]es who answered to the monicker [illegible]e. The "punk snow-bird" Keno [illegible], but he did recognize the others.

"Rio [illegible]ed" Hollister, and his running mate, "Blackie" Gault. Two of the dirtiest vinegaroons of the Border Brotherhood, whose activities extended from banditry and murder to dope smuggling, gun and Chink running. And now kidnapping. Keno nodded almost imperceptibly to himself.

There would be little use in looking for the girl north of the river. The idea was ransom, probably. If not that, some devilish scheme of revenge. The thought of a young girl, defenseless and alone, in Rio Red's rattler den south of the Rio wasn't a pretty one. Keno took off his gray Stetson, absently regarded the twin holes in its crown a moment, ran his fingers through his close cropped hair, then crammed it back on his head and twisted a cigarette.

Hoose anxiously regarded him, looked at his face—lean, windbitten, iron hard; at those curious eyes of slaty gray flecked with orange; at his close cropped, rusty hair and lithe body. Somehow he radiated confidence, calmness and encouragement. The chauffeur waited hopefully for this stranger in the gray flannel shirt, whipcord pants, and high laced boots to speak. Keno buttoned his fleece lined trench coat about him, took a deep drag on his brown quirly.

"You wait here, with the lady and the other," Keno told the man, shortly. "I'll haze on into Marfa, notify the sheriff and have 'em send out for you. Won't be long."

"How are you going to get through?" the harried chauffeur demanded.

Keno Curry looked at the shale slide ahead. It was no more than a line in the darkness.

"I'll get though."

Hoose walked back with him. "I ain't sure," he said, "but just before you got down here, I thought I heard an aeroplane starting up." He motioned vaguely toward the tumbled mass of Chinati ridges to the south.

"Uh-huh," nodded Keno, letting in his clutch. "'Spect you did, at that, feller."

There was the roar of an open cut-out. Hoose saw the little bus swing around the touring car, hit the shale with a screech of rubber. He heard rock rasp loudly as the car slithered from side to side. For a moment it seemed to hang on the edge of the cliff. Then it swung around the curve. From far below came the rattle and crash of rolling stones.

AS his coupé rolled up the canyon and began the stiff grade beyond, Keno muttered, "You're a slick un, Red, slick as a Chihuahua pup. But I didn't ride the hoot-owl trail a long, long time for nothin', feller. And none of your sidewinders is gonna puncture a good *sombrero* of mine and git off without payin' for same. No-siree, they're not.

"I'm aimin' to appear unto that dry-gulchin' hombre with words upon my tongue and a six-shooter in both fists. Better keep your fingers crossed, *El Rojo!*"

Keno's activities in Marfa didn't stop with notifying the sheriff of Presidio County of the occurence, and seeing that rescue parties were started hurriedly to the scene of the holdup. He held long converse with the Yeager brothers, Border veterans both, who ranched down Cienega way, wore six-shooters, and were ready and willing to use them. Then he went to the telephone office and put in a long distance call for the Slash-T Ranch in Valvarde County.

While waiting he smoked several brownies, his eyes narrow and very thoughtful. Mightily he wished that Tex Tolliver, owner of the "Slash" rancho, were at home—but Tex was away at New Orleans for ten days.

This escape would be just made to order for old Tex, Keno reflected grimly. But he, Keno Curry, recent buscadero, wet-steer runner and rider of the hoot-owl trail, would carry on, pit his skill and knowledge and cunning against the layout of Rio Red Hollister, outlaw and killer. He knew his Border inside and wrongside out, did Keno.

Presently his connection came through and Spit Lacey, foreman of the Slash, answered at the other end of the wire.

In a few words Keno acquainted him with the afternoon's facts, then proceeded to give a mouthful of terse, implicit directions. Spit protested profanely at first,

then grudgingly assented. Link Spillane, Tex Tolliver's pilot-mechanic, next took the phone and Keno talked rapidly to him for five minutes. *"Sta bueno."* He and Lupe Padillo would be on their way in a quarter of an hour, with everything.

Grinning satisfiedly, Keno left the phone office, where calls were flashing to Presidio, to Candelaria, to Terlingua and a score of other places with news of the holdup, murder and abduction. Warning of a big gray car with side curtains up, containing a big red-bearded man, a tall hawk-nosed man, and a putty-visaged punk.

The streets of Marfa were in a furor. The army post was aroused like a prodded beehive and the sheriff's office was humming. Posses were being organized all through the Bend—Rangers would arrive tomorrow. The Mexican Federal authorities in Chihuahua had been notified, and would send Rurales at once. Early on the morrow, army and Border Patrol planes would take up the search—others were coming from El Paso.

To all of which Keno Curry and the Yeager boys said little. They ate a hearty supper of steak and spuds and java at the Busy Bee, then drove out to the wind-swept and treeless American Legion airport, three miles distant from town, to await the arrival of Link Spillane.

It was bitter cold on the Marfa mesa that November night. The stars showed dimly through a gauzy haze, and a big gold plate of a moon shone red as blood. The norther whooped and howled, driving spirals of dust across the T, and men walked against it with their bodies bent to its blast. The sky would be rough for a ship that night.

But it didn't bother Link Spillane, the chimpanzee-faced minion of Tex Tolliver. At a quarter past eleven he set the plane down in the floodlights, and grinned knowingly at the waiting Keno Curry. With him was Lupe Padillo, a Yaqui-Mex vaquero on the Slash-T's payroll; a lithe, soft stepping and speaking young half-breed who was clever with all the subtlety of the Indian, could track a roadrunner on caprock, and was silent and swift as a cat on his feet—and at knifeplay.

"We grab some shut eye," announced Keno, when greetings were over. "For tomorrow, early, we're due to pack some certain gents I know [illegible]ta grief, double."

Roy Yeager lau[illegible] "Don't ram your head in a sack a[illegible]omebody yank the pucker strings, [illegible]o!" he jocularly advised.

"And watch the hind side of your vest," added his brother. "Yeah."

"Will do same," drawled Cu[illegible] seein' you boys later, I reckon."

II

THE sun had not yet cut the horizon next morning when the cabin plane crossed the Rio Grande between Ojinaga and San Carlos, flying at 18,000 feet. The tortuous mass of the Chinatis in the Bend, the sawtooth peaks of Cerro Bolundo, Capote and Slickrock, were all passed over in the darkness before dawn; now Link Spillane was pointing the spinner cap of the fast ship south by east over that savage segment of Chihuahua State called the Llano de los Cristianos, beyond which rose, blue and jagged on the skyline, the Mountains of the Ghost.

The Sierra Espectroso, a malpais of tumbled terrain, eroded and torn by water and wind. A crazy region where rocks and hills were piled in confusion of dip tilted limestone dikes, expanses of brown brittle lava, stretches of flinty waves, cinder gray and black. A shunned district of fantastic colorings, pinks and yellows and reds; savage and forbidding. An out-trail region, where few men came upon lawful business—and seventy miles south of the Rio Grande.

Keno Curry well knew what he was doing in crossing the river upon such an expedition as this. He was violating both American and Mexican neutrality laws, putting himself beyond the pale of Yankee aid. He was heading flush into a turbulent cauldron where few or no Americans ever went. Seldom even did Rurales, those crack mounted rangers of Mexico, or Federal troops, invade the Espectroso, for hiding places were legion and spots for ambush innumerable.

But Curry, ex-outlaw himself, and wise to the ways of the 'squite country as any gray wolf that prowled its wastes, headed straight for the rattler's den without a qualm. For he knew, beyond any doubt, that Rio Red Hollister and his gang of

hellions had the up in the Ghost Mountains, and knew, or believed he did, a certain rancher on the Llano Cristianos who vied where Rio Red's hacienda was located.

So while planes and Rangers and posses combed the Big Bend for the missing Bevagher and the murderer of one Morrow, the plane of Pecos Tex drove deeper into the air and each turn of the prop brought the sinister ramparts of the sierras nearer. Keno, Spillane and Lupe Padillo were going to do this thing their own way.

THE sun, well above the horizon now, shone dully through a haze of dust, but gave little warmth. The blue norther still yowled and whistled, driving clouds of alkali before it, obscuring the endless sea of chaparral and sage, greasewood and pear unreeling beneath. Keno, a pair of binoculars glued to his eyes, scanned the vague ground area ahead, while Padillo surveyed it keenly without glasses. The Yaqui-Mex knew this part of Chihuahua well, and presently he touched Curry's arm, pointed a slim brown finger to a spot off to the right.

Keno raked it with his glasses, nodded, cased the instrument. "Okay, Link," he grinned. "Set us down, then light a shuck for Marfa. And keep your eyes skinned *manana* morning."

"Gotcha, Keno. Watch where your suspenders cross, you and Lupe."

"Uh-huh. We'll try not to make one of them mistakes that don't bear repeatin'. See if you can't brake up this baby between the house and windmill, Link."

"Can do, mebbe. Hold your hats, hombres."

With motor cut, the ship swooped down from the sky in easy spirals, its prop a lazily blurring arc. A high, colored butte lay ahead, at its foot an open space green with grass and timbered with cottonwoods and scrub oaks, sycamore and cedar. A tiny creek meandered out of the foothills, its banks rife with candlewood and yucca, juniper and manzanita. And at an edge of the clearing, its back against the painted butte, squatted a rambling adobe ranch house, flat roofed and age stained, with red vega poles sticking from its sides and surrounded by straw thatched huts and mesquite pole corrals. Behind it stood a wooden windmill and dirt tank, and dim dirt road snaked away from the place into the Mountains of the Ghost.

Wind swirling in the wires, they dropped lower and lower, to at last touch the reddish sand earth, before the squat hacienda and taxi toward the windmill. Link Spillane deftly ground looped about and jockeyed his ship back into position for instant takeoff. The wheels had scarcely stopped rolling before Keno jerked the door open and with a six-shooter in one hand, a compact canvas roll in the other, dropped lightly to the ground.

Lupe Padillo landed right behind him, carrying rifle and a weighted sack. Keno kept his pistol trained upon Link Spillane until the cabin door banked shut, then motioned with it for the pilot to vamoose. The engine thundered and the plane shot across the wind-tortured sand and took the air heading north.

KENO and Padillo didn't wait to see their last link with Texas and civilization vanish into the teeth of the norther. With eyes stabbing their surroundings, every sense alert for a trap or trick, they advanced rapidly toward the ranch house, Curry still carrying his pistol.

The house was adobe, built long and low, with a porch running along the front and a patio, of sorts, in back. The windows were shuttered and heavily barred; the entrance door was massive and of aged oak. Several furtive peons peered at them from the corners of corral and jacal; mangy mongrels bayed and barked, guinea hens clattered raucously. It was an ordinary, typical Mex rancheria, this peaceful Hacienda Sanchez.

Kicking a snapping cur out of his path, Keno strode across the porch and rapped sharply upon the closed door with the barrel of his .45. Padillo, his eyes like sliding beetles, stood just behind him, his rifle held at a negligent ready. After a moment Keno hammered again, more insistently this time.

"Sanchez!" he shouted. *"Hola!* Come here! And pronto."

Directly a tiny slit in the face of the door opened, and a dark eye gleamed behind it. A surly voice demanded to know their business.

"I speak to old Gorro himself, and on a personal matter," snapped Keno. "Open

this door, you, and pluck no fowls in doing so."

"Or," added Padillo silkily, "by the beard of Benito Juarez, we will shoot away the lock and enter notwithstanding. Open up, fool."

This slangy and faultless Border lingo, spoken in Mex by both men, sent the spig away grumbling, and presently he returned and unbolted the massive door—stood aside for the two strangers to enter. He wore a big pistol at his waist, and a belt full of cartridges.

"Tell Sanchez," said Keno shortly, stopping just inside, "that I wish to speak with him at once. And here—in the hall. Hurry."

And when the man stared sullenly at him, without moving, the American's voice lashed out: "Come on, hombre. Or do I melt the barrel of this six-shooter over your thick skull?"

The Mexican shuffled off, glancing over his shoulder and with his lips moving silently. Padillo shrugged, shifted his rifle slightly, a wicked gleam in his inky eyes. Keno spun his pistol by the trigger guard, his outward appearance that of careless impatience. But Lupe, who knew better, savvied indeed that never was the ex-buscadero in a more dangerous mood than at that moment.

After a moment the beetle browed peon returned, in his wake a seamed-faced old Mexican who walked with a bad limp and supported himself with a heavy cane. His thinning hair was almost snow white, and his swart face wrinkled as a persimmon; his shaggy white brows and drooping mustache gave his visage a particularly predatory cast, which effect was heightened by a pair of sloe black, very bright eyes.

For a moment he stood surveying his visitors, halted, leaning on his cane. Then he laughed, a short, mirthless cackle.

"Ah! The Señor Keno, himself! And to what do I owe the honor of this visit to my poor roof?"

"I see your memory is still good, Gorro," replied Keno drily. "You can cut out the bushwa, however. I'm here on business, and in a hurry. The one with me is my friend, Lupe Padillo. Let's get down to cases."

"What business could you have with me?" countered Salazar, quirking his mustache. "Are you not now a most reputable citizen of the mig[illegible]e of Texas? Has not the trail of the [illegible]rown cold?"

"Not any," gr[illegible] Keno. "I ride on my own busine[illegible]d have the day broken many laws. And of you?

"First, we want breakfast, for when we hijacked that flying ship we didn't hav[illegible] time to eat—north of the river. S[illegible] want horses—and a lot of inf[illegible] You know me, Gorro; I'm no[illegible] for evasions or trifling."

"Yes," breathed Salazar, "I know you, Señor Keno. Once I knew you very well indeed. Knew you to be clever and sharp and cunning as the lobo, far more savage and patient than any Indian, like the ocelot that sleeps all day in the sun and strikes like a snake in the dark. But now—I am not sure. Yet we will talk, and you shall tell me things."

"Guess again, Gorro," said Keno grimly. "You mean *you'll* tell *me* things. I haven't forgotten you, Salazar. Go-between and lookout for bandits, cacher of loot, drygulcher on the side. Your ranch is a holeup for hop and little yella brothers, and you're working now with Rio Red and his boys. Well, I have business with Hollister. Does he still hang out at the Tavern of the Cottonwoods in the Ghost?"

OLD Gorro Sanchez carefully stroked his droopy mustache, his keen eyes fixed unwaveringly upon Keno Curry's face. Then he turned away.

"Come in to eat breakfast," he said shortly. "We will talk then."

Outside, someone was blowing a conch horn in long, mournful blasts.

Keno looked at Salazar, laughed in his face, then followed him down the hall.

Some three hours later, shortly past one o'clock in the afternoon, Keno Curry and Lupe Padillo reined up their ponies in a clump of manzanita just off a dim trail deep in the Sierra Espectroso. Huge blocks of granite, great slabs of fallen sandstone, lay tumbled about in confusion as if cast by giant's hands at play. Sawtooth pinnacles stabbed the dust hazy blue in fantastic patterns. The carpet of pines and conifers, mantling the slopes, looked dull and lustreless in the whooping wind, which yowled down gulch and arroyo, swale and canyon, like ten thousand banshees. The sturdy Mex ponies bowed their heads to

the cold blast, th[illegible]oulders humped futilely, while Ker[illegible] Lupe spied out the trail ahead, a[illegible]ir surroundings, with lynx-sharp eyes.

A mile farther, perched on the side of a wooded scarp like a dirt-dauber's nest, was [illegible] Tavern of the Cottonwoods, the hang-[illegible]o Red and his gang. The tavern [illegible]e affair, oblong in shape and built [illegible] walls enclosing a courtyard to [illegible]nich hea[illegible] gates at front and rear gave entrance and exit. Around it straggled a collection of mud and straw huts, 'dobe houses and pole corrals, and it could be reached by only the one dim road climbing up from the canyon.

Such was the Posada des Algondones, and the motley village that went under the name of Las Tres Marias.

It hadn't been difficult for Keno and Padillo to secure mounts from the rascally old Gorro Sanchez. And once out of sight of the rancho, Lupe had turned off into a little used path he knew of, a short cut through the Ghost foothills toward the hangout. Neither he or Curry had missed the significance of that moaning conch horn which sounded back at the Sanchez ranch—it was blown in signal of some sort to be passed on to The Cottonwoods. After half an hour on the trail, Lupe had slid away into the bush and remained almost an hour before rejoining Keno.

He came back leading a pinto pony, with a Mexican carbine in its saddle scabbard.

Keno had looked at Lupe, and the half-breed shrugged, flipped a thumb upward. "I expected him," he said casually. "So I hid, and kept my knife ready. If I took him prisoner, he would be in the way; if I bound him and left him in these mountains he would be killed by wild beasts. So I threw the knife, señor."

He lit a corn shuck cigarette. "It was the one who admitted us to the Sanchez ranch," Lupe finished. "He was called Quijote."

Keno Curry laughed.

"You are a devil, Padillo," he said, "and will surely go to hell. But anytime you get ready to go, I'll trail with you."

"Si, señor," grinned Lupe. "I know that. We go ahead, no?"

Now Keno thoughtfully regarded his goal from the clump of manzanitas, his lips pursed and cold eyes narrowed. He took off his bullet-punctured Stetson, regarded the twin holes in it a long moment, then slapped it back upon his rusty hair. The breed, watching him sidewise, smiled slightly. The hat was but an excuse for the Señor Curry to go raise the roof. For the Señor Curry wasn't happy unless he was up to his neck in high powered hell raising.

It wasn't so much the rescue of the girl that appealed to Keno; it was the risk, the adventure of the thing. To him girls were merely persons of the opposite sex—nice to hold in your arms sometimes, that was all. Girls—with marriage in the background—had always appealed to Keno about like a corral does to a broomtail mustang who has never felt a rope. He shied off of them. They meant responsibility instead of independence.

Yet Keno Curry didn't like the idea of old Hard Case Meagher's daughter being in the hands of Rio Red Hollister. Or of anyone else's daughter, for that matter.

He pitched away his cigarette stub, hitched up his pistol belt.

"I'm riding ahead as per schedule, Lupe," he said shortly. "And I'll keep my eyes peeled for yuh. S'long."

"God be with you, señor. I will see you at the appointed time."

III

A COW horn was blowing up in the hills somewhere when Keno started his pony to climbing the rocky trail leading up to the *posada*.

He smiled thinly, his eyes alert and watchful. He knew that eyes were watching him from the village and inn, that other eyes were following his ascent from the pines and conifers. Also he knew that any second might bring a zipping bullet, but that he would have to chance. He rather counted on Rio Red's curiosity to let him make his destination without being bushwhacked.

It was half an hour before he negotiated the goat-track trail, and walked his pony into the purlieus of the hamlet. The smell of peppery cooking tainted the air—frijoles, tortillas, chili. Many dogs barked at him, just as filthy *pelados* eyed him curiously from hut and adobe.

Keno rode on past the hovels toward the

inn on the ledge above, his body slouched in the saddle, coat collar turned up about his chin, hat brim pulled low over his eyes. The carbine and scabbard of the luckless Quijote hung by his stirrup and two tied-down six-shooters were on each hip. Keno Curry was primed for bear that November morning.

He surveyed the posada impassively as he reined up before its open gateway. Its walls were of adobe, three feet thick, the doors were of heavy iron-wood; the windows were barred with iron gratings. It had no porch, but there were balconies to several of the windows on the second floor. Its plaster was cracking in places, but the walls were fortress-like, and the place seemed sinisterly silent and deserted.

For just a second Keno looked at the place, his eyes coldly expectant; then he touched spurs to his pony and rode through the open gateway into the patio.

Galleries enclosed it on two sides. A huge cottonwood tree grew in its center. Five horses stood at a watering trough in the rear. A shawled señora ground maize in a stone bowl nearby, while a gnarled old man sat with his back against a post braiding a rawhide riata. Outside the wind whistled with increased violence, its sweep cut off from the shelter of the courtyard. Keno shot a sharp look about, then swung easily from the saddle and whistled at a peon boy who stood watching him.

"Boy, come here!"

The youth shambled forward, his black eyes wide with curiosity, and took the reins that the gringo handed him; he listened without comment to the Americano's even, terse voice give orders as to the care and disposition of his mount. For a second Keno watched him lead the horse toward the stable in the rear. Then he heeled about, unbuttoned his trench coat, hitched his guns into position and walked across the patio to the closed entrance door of the cantina.

The muffled sound of voices within ceased as he mounted the three steps and thrust open the heavy door.

Keno didn't hesitate. His heels pounded heavily on the stone floor as he strode over to the rude bar, and his eyes raked every inch of the big, low ceiling taproom. Shadowy and chilly it was, despite the 'squite chunk fire going in the stone fireplace, chilly, and redolent with wine and tobacco scent. Ten or twelve men seated at the tables, hands hidden, watching him like hawks. A fat bartender, gross featured Mexican barkeep eyeing him with oily gloating.

"A slug of Jose Querva," Keno told the Shuck. "And make it one with sideboards, Panzon."

He turned and motioned to the watching men at the tables. "Step up, hombres. Step up and name your likker."

After a moment chairs scraped, men got to their feet. Keno grinned impudently as he watched them sidle up to the bar and ring him about closely. Just about the saltiest looking crew of birds he had ever seen under one roof outside the pen, he summed up. Two or three Yankee renegades, the rest Mexicans and breeds—breeds both white and Yaqui. Well, Rio Red would have a gang like that—no softies in his spread.

The outlaws in turn regarded Keno narrowly as they filled their glasses. They studied his lean, thin-lipped face, his cold, orange-flecked eyes, that hard visage with the mark of the out-trail upon it. They saw his bullet-punctured Stetson, his slim, supple hands, the twin guns in half-breed holsters: the left hand six-shooter tied down, the right cased in a swivel scabbard so that it could be instantly tipped upward and fired without unholstering. And those minions of Rio Red glanced at each other and kept their own hands close to their weapons, ready to go slamming for them at the slightest hostile sign.

Keno saw, and grinned wickedly.

"Keep your shirts on, hombres," he said easily. "My biz here is with the Big Shot, not you. Here's mud in yore eye."

THEY drank, but watched Keno through their glasses. And one, a coarse featured American ruffian with club nose, smashed almost flat, and an eye puckered by a nasty knife scar, banged down his glass and faced him belligerently.

"Who are yuh and where did yuh ride from?" he demanded gruffly.

"I'm Cap Starr of the Texas Rangers and I rode from Sanchez's ranch," Keno replied coldly, and two tiny sparks snapped across his eyes. "Who the devil are you to be askin' questions, feller?"

Squinteye flushed darkly, and his right

hand dropped towar[illegible]s gun. His lips drew back in a snar[illegible]s piggish eyes reddened, he thrust hi[illegible] forward. Keno did not move. But hi[illegible] eyes suddenly became hard and diamond-like. His teeth gleamed in a brief, expectant smile.

And when the big renegade hesitated, [illegible]ke. "Go ahead, brother," he in[illegible]ly. "Go right ahead. Open yore [illegible], and let it all down hill to [illegible]h. Go [illegible]nd drag 'em."

Squinteye licked his lips, slid his glance about the faces of his companions. Their fingers were taloned, but they weren't going to butt in on his private quarrel. Not yet they weren't. They didn't know who this busky was, but they recognized him as a rider of the out-trail, one of their own lawless ilk. And none present knew better than Squinteye that this man facing him so easily was a natural born smokeroo, and rank poison at lead slinging. And he took back water. With a growl he turned away to the bar.

"Fill 'em up, Gordito," he grunted. Then to Keno, "The Chief'll talk with you muy pronto, waddy. And you better have a pat story."

"Yeah?" Keno twirled his glass, then reached for the makings in his shirt pocket. "I reckon I savvy Rio Red and Blackie Gault just a little better'n you do, Squinteye—if that's your monicker. No matter. I'm downin' this shot of cactus juice on you, brother; then I'm gonna wrap my belly around a mess of food. It's cold and hungry ridin' out, today."

He walked over to a table, sat down facing the bar, shoved his hat on the back of his head. The paunchy Mexican behind the zinc bar called to someone behind a rear door, and presently a black haired, sloe eyed Mexican girl entered the room. stepping lightly as an ocelot. Slender and pretty and graceful she was, with her white-toothed smile. Keno surveyed her admiringly, grinned, gave his order.

"What's your name?" he asked as she was ready to leave.

"Rosa," replied the girl with a low laugh. "Rosa Torres, Señor Americano of the Posada Algodones." Then in broken English, "My uncle is padrone, yes."

"Uh huh. Well, you're a pretty señorita, and you've got a pretty name. It would be a shame to change it."

"Oh, my! What talk!" Rosa Torres hunched a shoulder, snapped a finger, but as she left she flung a flashing smile across her shoulder at Keno. And Keno didn't miss the sullen looks directed at him from all corners of the room. He slapped his leg and grinned impudently.

"I like this drum," he remarked to the assemblage in general. "Mebbe I'll stay here quite a spell."

A MAN cursed swiftly. A second one growled beneath his breath. And Squinteye, his face flushed and jowls red, was goaded into a retort.

"Mebbe you will, at that. Two-gun hombres what come here rarin' up on their hind legs and lookin' for trouble usually do stay here busky. But not standin' up, they don't."

"Ain't that funny," replied Keno. Absently he began running the forefinger of his right hand through his hair—a gunfighter's trick. "I got a hunch," he said musingly, "that prob'ly I'll hafta do a little shootin' today. Some folks just naturally seem bound to prod up trouble. I'm afraid, big boy—" he looked straight at Squinteye, "that you ain't even tryin' to get along with me."

The big ruffian cursed. "I'm checkin' by for now, bucko," he said bluntly. "And I reckon there's enough red hots in this joint to take care of the likes of you who come here hossin' for a scrap. But you better lay off of Rosa, I'm warnin' yuh, Rio Red'll stake yuh out on an anthill."

Keno grinned, but there was no mirth in the gesture. And the look that Rosa Torres gave the renegade as she crossed the room with a waiter piled with steaming dishes made him turn away guiltily. She had heard his last remark, and her black eyes were gleaming ominously as she deposited Keno's dinner on the table.

He fell to with a will, apparently engrossed in the meal, but his brain was working like a shuttlecock. He was playing his own game now, and was in his element. He had a theory of his own about a situation like this in which he was outnumbered, and facing long odds.

He knew he was under keen observation from every man in the room, but it was also evident that none had any intention of immediately forcing a quarrel

upon him. His entry into the posada had been entirely too easy to be natural —it hadn't been disputed in the least. To get in was one thing, but to get out would be a horse of a different color, in fact, a very dubious color.

Rio Red was probably curious about him, and wanted to find out his business before cutting his wolves loose. And that the kidnaped girl was somewhere within the tavern, Keno didn't doubt in the least. If he was going to help her, aid her to escape, he would have to set his plan to working pretty quick, for time was skipping on and the evening waning. But where she was confined he hadn't the slightest idea and he couldn't ask questions without arousing instant suspicion.

So he leisurely ate the peppery cooking, and kept his eyes upon the doors. Once the black haired girl came into the bar room, took a tray, bottle and glasses out with her. And her eyes were hot and sullen. She slid a sidewise glance at Keno, but her expression told him nothing.

There might be an out there, he reflected, if he played his cards right. Very thoughtfully he tapered a thin brown quirly, lit it, and fanned his lungs deeply with tobacco smoke.

The patio doors of the taproom opened suddenly, and three men came in. Keno Curry surveyed them without the slightest change of expression, his face shadowed by coiling smoke clouds.

Rio Red Hollister was one. Gigantic, big boned, ham fisted, wearing twin six-shooters and a high-peaked Mex sombrero all hammered silver and filagree, and hand tooled boots. His golden eyes swept the room narrowly, rested a split second upon Keno, then passed on, and his red splay beard quivered as he said something in a low, booming voice to the saturnine Blackie Gault, who walked with him.

His segundo also wore two guns. The third man was a burly, swarthy individual with a purple birthmark covering one side of his face, and who had the shoe button eyes of a gila-monster. A breed, and a bad 'un at that, Keno instantly saw.

The fellow wore his pistols low slung, and thonged, and as he followed Rio Red and Gault to the bar he cast a low browed, speculative look at Keno. The talk and cardplay in the room slowly ceased, and the glances of the assembled outlaws shifted from the trio to Curry, then back again.

They seemed to be expecting something, and awaiting it with a sort of tense anticipation. Keno, his back against the wall and seated where he could survey the entire room in front of him, pulled negligently at his cigarette, his face grim with the impassivity of an image.

HOLLISTER, facing the bar, tossed off a drink with apparent negligence, but he was narrowly scanning Keno through a glass set in an angle among the bottles. A frown creased his forehead as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and slowly turned around. And it deepened as he ambled across the room to where Keno sat. Halting, he looked down at the visitor, thumbs hooked in his gun belt.

"Well, I'm damned," he said shortly. "The old Keno kid in person."

"Long time no see," nodded Keno. "Two years, three?"

"Three," said Rio Red. He pushed back his sombrero brim and scowled. "What kind of cards you got up your sleeve, now, Keno?"

"Three ladies and a pair of fish-hooks. I suddenly took a notion that a change of air might do me good, Red. Had a mind to journey down and see what makes your hangout tick in this curious fashion. Yeah."

"Yeah?" Hollister's scowl deepened. "Go on and say the rest of it, waddy. Always huntin' trouble, ain't you, Curry?"

Keno's mouth tightened, as if a frost had hit his face. And his eyes were blank as water when he looked straight at Rio Red.

"No," he replied with cold deliberation. "I ain't wranglin' trouble. But neither am I side-steppin' one iota out of its path when it comes huntin' me, Hollister. I know coyote poison when I see it and I don't have to step on a polecat to figger what he smells like. Mister Busky, I been weaned."

"Keep your shirt on, Keno," said Red, rather hastily. But his eyes were ugly. "Don't git off half cocked. It's good to see you again, *amigo*."

"Yeah?" Keno laughed coldly. "Is the house mine?"

"All yours, know[illegible] of old that you'd fight a bear and g[illegible] him first bite, I'm naturally kinda cur[illegible]as to what brings you here to our peac[illegible] village."

"Uh-huh." Keno tw[illegible]d a quirly into shape before answering. And when he did reply his voice was hard and even. "I'm [illegible] for a half baked punk who tried [illegible]m to me from the bottom. I reckon [illegible] me well enough to know that's sufficien[illegible]d."

Rio Red's eyes widened. "Who is the hombre?" he demanded. "And what was the row?"

"I don't know his monicker," said Keno, "and the row's a personal matter. When I tell about it, I'm sayin' it with the business end of my hogleg. Any hombres in your spread been down Del Rio way lately?"

"Not as I know of," said Hollister. He looked relieved, the tight and watchful expression lessened on his bearded face. "Seen anybody that looks like him?"

"Not yet. But I ain't give up hopes. Think I'll tarry till tomorrow, and kinda grow up with the country."

"Sure, sure," said Rio Red with too quick enthusiasm. "We can fix you up *'sta bueno* at the Algodones. Bunk, chow, everything. Make yourself at home, Keno. Right at home."

"Will do," nodded Keno shortly. "Who's that jasper in the door with the dead-shad eyes and snow-bird mug? I hope he'll know me the next time he sees me. *Seguramente!* I ain't exactly got a yen to be stared at."

The slim gunman called Hype, lounging in the entrance, hands in his pants' pockets and fishy eyes fixed in a bleak stare upon Keno, drew back his lips in a snarl at Curry's words. A convulsion of hate swept his thin, ratlike visage—a nerve twitched incessantly in his face.

"Oh, Hype's okay," said Rio Red quickly. "Just a little manner of his, that's all. Pay no attention to it. He's on the stuff, savvy?"

"Savvy." Keno studied the beady, low-lidded eyes of the punk a long moment with cold appraisal. "He reminds me quite a bit of the *jibaro* I'm lookin' for."

Suddenly with the deadly speed and grace of a fighting panther, Keno Curry was on his feet, his body slightly crouched from the waist, head thrust a bit forward like a snake about to strike. And his face, his eyes, were stamped in a killer's snarl.

SOMEONE cursed hoarsely. Feet shuffled. A glass fell to the floor, shattered. Rio Red dropped back two paces, breathing harshly through his nose. Without a glance at the others Keno slid across the floor and halted the snowbird, whose face was white and twitching.

"Where were you yesterday evenin'—*late,* hombre?" grated Keno.

Hype's hands were in front of his face now, and trembling. His features were livid with fear, his lips worked with no sound coming from them. Keno took a step nearer.

"Talk, partner," he said between his teeth. "I don't repeat questions."

"Say," whimpered Hype, cowering against the wall. "I ain't done nothing to you, mister. I was here yesterday, all day, and c'n prove it."

"A lie," said Keno coldly. "You're brave when you're all yenned up and you have a nice target between some fella's shoulder blades to aim your gat at, ain't you? Sure! Why don't you drag that popgun of yours now, huh? You got it under your arm."

Hype's breath gurgled—he held his hands, palm outward, toward Keno. It was evident that he was badly in need of a shot of dope to steady his tortured nerves. Keno pivoted away and faced the room with a sneer.

"A red hot, that lad," he told the lowering browed Hollister. "I guess he's not my bacon, after all. Just wanted to make sure."

Rio Red growled deep in his throat. "I ain't seen your hole card yet, Keno," he said ominously. "I know you're one salty jasper, and a curly wolf with your guns, but don't get fat-headed over it. And I want to know a couple of things. One is—where did you come from, here?—if you think me forward, askin'."

"From Gorro Sanchez's hangout," said Keno shortly. "He directed me. Anything else?"

"Yeah. What did you mean by sayin' Hype was good at shooting people in the back. Anything in particular?"

"How old is Anne?" Keno countered mockingly. His hard-cut lips barely

moved when he spoke, and his eyes were deadly with frozen menace. "Lay off the questions, Red. I'll say my piece in my own good time. I didn't exactly come here bearin' no olive branch."

A moment Hollister looked at him, his face suffused with blood, his eyes narrow and suspicious. Then his outthrust jaw relaxed, and he managed a shrug. "Okay, Keno," he grunted. "But don't try any tricks. You're making heap big medicine talk here today."

"Which talk I'm backin' to the limit," replied Keno. "I been leadin' a peaceful life for a long time, and I'm doggone weary of it. But right now I crave a long drink and a place to grab a little shut-eye. Can do?"

"Yeah. Room upstairs. Gordito will show it to yuh. The drink's on me."

The liquor finished, Keno said he wanted to have a look at his cayuse before kicking in, and left the taproom.

He had started the ball to rolling all right, he reflected, as he crossed the patio to the horse stalls in the rear. The skids were greased, and he was already starting to slip. That he was under suspicion he knew only too well; Rio Red and Blackie Gault were both leery of him and they would likely take drastic measures to put him out of the way. Keno's reputation, two, three years back, had been a heartily respected one among the Border Brotherhood.

QUICKLY saddling his pony, he hitched it head to the stable door, threw out a little feed, and went again into the patio. Someone had taken the carbine and scabbard from his saddle, and Keno Curry's smile was cold and grim as he walked slowly and fashioned a Bull Durham cigarette and lit up.

The Mexican woman was still pounding tortillas, but the old man who had been weaving the riata had gone. The north wind howled around the corners of the posada like ten thousand devils, and the sun shone a sickly yellow, without warmth, through the dust haze in the sky.

As Keno approached the long gallery of the inn, a slim hand reached out of a narrow cubicle between two of the aged cedar posts and motioned him to stop. His eyes brightened, then narrowed. It was the girl, R[illegible]a, and she was glancing anxiously all abo[illegible]t.

"Stand so [illegible] smoke the *cigarillo*, señor," she s[illegible]n a voice scarcely louder than a whisper. "For this place has eyes and ears everywhere. Listen, thou. Are you one of *El Rojo's* men?"

"Not any," replied Keno in li[illegible] ish. "The Red One is a vine[illegible] I will stomp him into the sa[illegible]

"Good. He is a devil [illegible] I hate [illegible] well as fear him. My uncle is as clay between his hairy fingers. He says I must be the Red One's woman soon. Yet it is not of this I would speak. Do you know aught of the gringo girl they brought here last night?"

Keno exhaled tobacco smoke slowly, his low stare traveling around the patio. He nodded slightly. "Is she still here?" he asked.

"Yes. In one of the east chambers, under guard of old Carlotta, a Yaqui witch. To now The Red One has not harmed her, but he is not a patient man, señor. Also I think he and the Señor Gault are suspicious of you."

"I know. Will you help me get the American señorita away from here, Rosa? Meet me some place where we can talk without being spied upon?"

"That will be very difficult, Americano. Yet if I can aid you, I will. But I do not know where we can speak alone—eyes and ears are everywhere. This is the Red One's town, this unspeakable Tres Marias."

Keno thumped away his cigarette, hitched up his gun belt.

"Try and get word to the girl that help is near," he said briefly. "And then stand by for any message from me. A certain countryman of yours will likely bring it, and he will use my name as a password so you may be sure. Okay?"

"*'Sta bueno, señor.*"

The pretty oval face and black shining hair disappeared, and Keno strolled on to the cantina door, his manner lazily alert. Of course it might be a trap, but he was inclined to trust the Mexican girl. She certainly didn't love either Rio Red or her uncle, and seemed muchly out of place in the Posada des Algodones. Likely she was a bit of flotsam washed up into the Mountains of the Ghost by the last revolution.

The men in the barroom were just a

little too obviously indiffe nt to his entry when he returned. And Keno's grin was wolfish as he strode ov... the bar and ordered an aguardiente.

Rio Red and Blackie Gau... were apparently deep in conversation at one of the tables, but the snowbird called Hype, and ...eno had tagged Gotcheye, looked ...h veiled, malignant glances. ... ev... had gotten outside of a sh... and h... is shaky nerves in hand again. And there was a calculating, gloating gleam in the scar-faced one's snaky orbs.

Oh, he had started the ball rolling all right when he mentioned about Hype shooting people in the back. But the chance to show up the yellow little hophead had been to strong for Keno, and he had been itching for the punk to go for his gun. To kill such a specimen of humanity meant no more to Keno Curry than stepping on a tarantula or plugging a sidewinder. And now, as he tossed off his drink and looked around, he was plumb ready for them to cut their wolves loose.

"Guess I'm ready to hit the hay, Panzon," he told the barkeep. "Show me my billet, will yuh? Wanta get three, four hours shut-eye before supper. Then I'll take on your fellows in a poker game. I got some jack I want to lose or triple."

"Be seeing you," growled Rio Red. "Good night."

Keno nodded, showed his teeth in a mirthless grin, followed the paunchy and sullen bartender out of the taproom and up a flight of stone stairs. The good Gordito evidently didn't relish being labeled "Panzon, or "big belly," by Keno, and his eyes were malevolent, if hooded. In one hand he carried a tray, a bottle of aguardiente, and a thick glass.

THE Mexican piloted Keno down a dim hallway whose adobe walls were defaced and scribbled upon, and halted before a stout oak door, fitting its rusty lock with a key he took from his pocket. Keno motioned him in first, held out his hand for the key. Gordito started to protest, then saw the deadly look in Keno's eyes and thought better of it. With a shrug he surrendered the key, sat tray and bottle on a chair, and padded from the room. Keno closed and locked the door after him.

Very carefully he looked about. An empty gasoline tin, with a stub of candle upon it stuck in its own tallow. The floor was bare, save for a moth-eaten and worn coyote skin rug. The walls were thick, and one deep window gave onto the courtyard —a window without bars or panes. A slanting lean-to roof, just below, marked the end of the stables.

Keno gave a grunt of satisfaction, stared a second at the bed. It was only a filthy mattress filled with straw, about a foot from the floor, with two thin blankets thrown over it. A stone jug, half full of stagnant water, stood against the wall. Save for these articles the room was as bare as a monk's cell.

Very closely Keno Curry examined the aguardiente bottle, paying particular attention to the neck and cork. Apparently the stopper had not been tampered with, and the bottle was full, but the buscadero's keen eye instantly picked up the almost invisible flaw where cork fitted against glass. He opened a corkscrew on his pocket knife, and drew the stopper, his eyes like cold flames.

Someone had taken out the original cork, put something in the bottle of liquor, then substituted a new cork. Clever, but not quite clever enough. Well, two could play that game, Keno reflected.

Pouring out a glass of the red liquid, he sniffed it, then stealthily poured it into the water jug. A little he spilled upon the floor, upon his clothes. Some he left in the glass. Sneaked a look out the window down into the court, listened a long moment at the door, then satisfied, cast himself upon the verminous bed and pulled the blankets lightly up to his hips. In a couple of minutes he was snoring lustily.

Snoring, but far from asleep. Every sense alert as a laired animal, Keno waited, his fingers touching the tips of his hidden gun butts.

Downstairs, in the taproom, Rio Red Hollister was giving a very good imitation of a bust of Rodin's Thinker. He looked like a red-bearded Saracen as he leaned on a table, his puma-yellow eyes half closed. At last he called Gotcheye and Hype over to him, and his voice was harsh and subdued as he gave them terse instructions. The burly breed with the purple birthmark on his face, who went by the

name of Lucero, saw the confab and grinned evilly at the sulky bartender.

"I theenk thees *malo hombre,* who come here with the cheep on hees shoulders, stay wan long time," he chuckled. "The little hongree coyotes they eat thees night, eh, Gordito?"

"Yes," growled Gordito. "Would that I could sink six inches of steel in his belly, and watch him die slow and very, very painful. Yet I have heard of this one before, and men who I know are *malo hombres* speak most respectful of him. They say he is a devil with those pistols."

"No man is a devil," retorted Lucero, "when the white powder has put heem to sleep and made useless hees fingers. There are more ways than one to skin the rabbit. He will go—like this!"

Lucero snapped his fingers, laughed, drained his glass.

Meanwhile, Rio Red was talking to his henchmen in no uncertain terms. Finished, he banged a hairy fist upon the table.

"Better make it stick," he warned them. "I don't know just what he's down here for, but it's for no good. Keno Curry's rank poison when he's on the prod, and I'm taking no chances. He may have got wind of that stunt across the river yesterday, but I don't yet see how he got down here, past Sanchez's, without me knowing about it. Anyhow, Gordito has seen to it that he will sleep well—he likes his likker But let me tell you fellows something, and don't forget. It is your job to see that he sleeps long, buskys."

Rio Red Hollister turned down his thumbs in a significant gesture. Gotcheye grinned, slapped his holster. Hype's lips writhed and his fish eyes flamed as he turned away. The snow he had taken had restored his ratty courage; now he was ready for anything. He looked at his burly, scarred-face companion, nodded, pivoted on his heel.

"His name's tripe, Chief," he snarled. "And you can drink to that. Let's go, Squinch."

AT the first, almost inaudible rustle beyond the window, Keno's alert body slowly relaxed, went limp and pliant. He did not stir, nor did his sonorous snores break their raucous monotony.

Perhaps an hour had passed; maybe an hour and a half. They were taking their time about it, Keno reflected, even though twice someone had crept up noiselessly to the locked door and listened to his snores. Now they thought him doped and dead to the world, and were closing in to finish the job.

A head appeared above the window ledge as its owner crouched just beneath the sill, unbreathing. His face showed a carelessly upflung arm and Keno looked through lids no more open than a pencil mark and saw the pasty visage of Hype outlined against the light. For a long moment the snowbird waited, watching him, his eyes taking in the open bottle and dreggy glass; then lightly swung himself up and over the casement, landing like a cat, on the balls of his feet, in the room.

A second head and shoulders appeared —the scared, bloated face of Gotcheye. And the burly ruffian gave an almost inaudible grunt of satisfaction as his gaze rested upon the prone and limp American.

"Cold turkey," he whispered to Hype. "G'wan and take him, kid. He almost give you a hemorrhage downstairs a while ago. You got it comin' to yuh. Part his hair real nice-like now with your dingbat. Just take your time, Kid. Take your time an' do it neat."

Hype's lips drew back over tobacco darkened teeth as he slid a hand in his pocket and drew out a heavy blackjack. The blunt nosed automatic he transferred to his left hand. Then, stepping lightly as a bobcat, he crept toward the snoring, unconscious man. Apparently Gordito's dope had done its stuff okay. Gotcheye licked his chops in anticipation. He had seen Hype handle a bat before.

The hophead halted above Keno, tensed his body, raised his right arm to strike downward with his loaded leather. And at that second Keno Curry moved.

Moved with the startling speed of a fighting jaguar. His bent knees uncoiled like steel springs as he twisted his body sidewise and upward, right hand and arm flashing in a pivot like a bolt of lightning. And the barrel of a heavy .45 six-shooter crashed flush into Hype's diabolical face—landed with a sickening crunch across the bridge of his nose and eyes.

Before Hype had hit the floor, scarcely before the sound of the blow ended, Keno

Curry was on his feet. His gun was trained unerringly upon the slack jawed, knife branded visage of Gotcheye, who, pistol in hand, was hanging onto the window casement. A startled, choky gasp burst from the ruffian's lips and his eyes dilated like bulging marbles.

"Please move, hombre," came Keno's voice. "Just your little finger! Please! I for[illegible]"

"Don't [illegible] croaked Gotcheye. "Don't kill me, partner!"

Curry stepped softly to the window ledge. "Drop that gat inside, then shin on in," he tersely commanded. "And you'd better pull the rag out in doing it, fella. I got a lot of little chores to do today and I can't call my time my own."

Gotcheye clambered hurriedly into the room, his breath coming hard through pinched nostrils. He held his hands shoulder high, and as he turned around he tried to keep his eyes on Keno. But it was no go. A deft hand patted him for weapons—the next second the barrel of the .45 landed against his cranium, just over his right ear. His skull seemed to crack into fragments—oblivion swooped over him in an explosion of red and scarlet lights.

He banged to the floor and lay there, one arm bent under him, and he didn't move.

A second Keno studied his victims coldly, his fingers shaping a quirly. Both were iced as cucumbers, and bleeding like stuck hogs. They would be out for a long, long time—he didn't know, or care, whether he had smashed their skulls or not. Sticking the unlighted cigarette between his lips, he deftly slashed thongs of the rawhide bottom from the peon chair in the room and trussed them up in Spanish knots. He was taking no chances just then.

A SLIGHT sound outside the door brought him up sharply. The prowler was out there listening again. Keno got to his feet, slid the gun from his holster, and grumbling inaudibly under his breath, tiptoed across the floor to the locked doorway. The key was still in its hole.

"Who's there?" he asked gruffly, in a sotto-voice, giving a fairish imitation of Gotcheye's muffled tones. "And whaddaya want?"

Someone stirred beyond the oak barrier. A voice whispered. "Did you get him?"

For answer Keno turned the key—swiftly jerked the door inward. And before the snooping Gordito could leap away or cry out, Curry's gun arced down and banged against his pate. At the same time Keno's left hand grasped the Mexican's collar and gave a jerk.

Dazed by the first blow, Gordito gurgled and tried to scream, but he was inside the room when the second blow laid him out unconscious. Keno closed and relocked the door, pocketed the key, trussed up the padrone like Hype and Gotcheye. Then he went to the window, looked over the patio carefully, and flung a leg out. Half sliding and half crawling he reached the edge of the lean-to roof, and swung himself lightly to the ground at the end of the patio hard by the stables.

He didn't pick any daisies then. Fifteen seconds later he was in his horse stall, with a goggle-eyed peon boy backed against the shed, hands in the air. The pinto was saddled and bridled. Keno forked leather, rode out of the corral, cut around a corner of the sheds to where a small arched gate gave out of the tavern into a narrow, twisting byway which ran between two rows of twelve foot high organ and barrel cactus.

The gate was ajar. With a kick of his heel Keno sent it open, and rode out of the Algodones bent low in the saddle, his pinto's belly almost touching the ground as it ran. There was not even a shot fired after him. Half turning in his saddle, Keno thumbed his nose at the sinister caravanserai as he dashed through the filthy purlieus of Las Tres Marias.

"Prodded yuh to hummin', didn't I?" he grinned, addressing his remarks to the gaunt adobe pile. "And if I ain't greatly mistooken, you're gonna hum a sight more before mornin'."

IV

HALFWAY down the trail he passed an old Mexican astride a jogging donkey, serape drawn tightly about his head and shoulders. Keno went by him in a cloud of dust, giving his mount the reins. A mile beyond the foot of the road he cut off into a bushy by-path leading into a jumbled mass of swales and arroyos and manzanita thickets. Nor did he halt

his fast pace until he reached a small, kidney-shaped burn well hidden in the scrub pines and junipers blanketing a frowning, red-and-black scarp, a good three miles from the inn.

So far as he could tell, there had been no signs of pursuit. But he had heard the mournful wailing of a conch horn from up in the village, and knew that lookouts in the hills were being warned to watch for him.

The afternoon waned. Keno tethered his pony in a sheltered hollow, then hunkered down behind a mass of rock and scrub greasewood well out of the chilly blast. With the patience of a red Indian he waited, now and then smoking cigarettes and keeping a wary eye upon his immediate surroundings. There was silence for half an hour, an hour, an hour and a half.

Sounded the clink of a hoof on a stone. Then came the deliberate footsteps of a shaggy burro picking its way among the jagged rocks below the barn. On it was mounted an ancient peon wrapped to the eyes in a ragged serape, smoking a corn-shuck cigarette. The same old man Keno had passed on the trail. Keno grinned, whistled the curious three-note treble of the piñon quail.

The burro halted, and the ragged peon dismounted with a lithe agility most surprising for all his seeming years. The serape came down, the dirty beard came off, and Lupe Padillo grinned up at Keno Curry.

"You came down the trail, señor," he said, "much faster than you rode up."

"A darned sight," grunted Keno. "Where did you get that donkey?"

Padillo sat on his heels, pushed back his sombrero, shrugged a shoulder. "From a man who does not need him any more," he replied evasively.

"More knife chunkin', huh? Lupe, you shore are goin' to hell!"

Lupe grinned. "It is likely. Did you find out what you went for?"

"Uh-huh. The girl's up there all right."

In a few words he acquainted the mestizo with the happenings at the tavern, and of his escape.

Padillo smiled thinly. "I met the girl, Rosa," he said. "The American girl is in a room on the balcony, under guard. Also I found out where the airplane of the Red One is kept. Some four miles distant, across the butte, in a hidden hollow. No one questions an old man who rode to the Algondones to escape the wind and cold. Nor does a soul suspect me in the village. What next now, Señor Keno?"

"This." For five minutes Keno Curry spoke rapidly in Spanish, and every now and then Lupe Padillo nodded comprehension. And when he had finished the half-breed's eyes were glowing like live coals in his copper colored face.

"All right," he grinned. "With luck we will succeed, *amigo*."

"Yeah—with luck. But luck's a fool's excuse that will hang him sooner or later, Lupe. Don't forget that."

"I don't, señor. But neither do I forget my sharp knife, or your trigger fingers. And I think that the Señor Rio Red will not forget, also."

They ate a sheepherder's supper of frijoles and cold goat meat as quick dusk fell. The wind, instead of abating with the coming of night, seemed to whoop with redoubled fury and the cold increased in proportion. The sky was still clear, though hazed a bit with dust, and the first stars shone wanly. Soon there would be a moon.

Their cigarettes finished, the two conspirators got busy. Lupe untied his commandeered donkey—sent the little beast on its way with a sharp rap on the rump. The three Mexican ponies were tethered nearby. Presently the breed set off down the path, riding one and leading a second. He waved a blithe farewell to Keno, disappeared in the dark.

FOR almost an hour Keno waited near the third horse, thinking and smoking. He knew that lookouts would be watching the trail below for him, but he had found out, via the mestizo, of another path leading up to Tres Marias. Yet, at the first sign of recognition, he would be shot down without hesitation, he knew. And at the tavern the hellions of Rio Red would be on the alert, just waiting for him to come back. It was a long, long chance he was taking that November night, but it didn't seem to bother him greatly.

At last he arose, ground out his stub of quirly under a boot heel, forked his cayuse. All about him was the vast and towering and jagged shadow of the Ghost,

sinister and mysterious under a dead black night sky from which dim stars winked. The wind tore viciously at his heavy coat, wailed like a million wi[illegible]s through manzanita and juniper and pi[illegible]. Keno Curry cursed softly under his brea[illegible]

A blood-red globe of moon, lopsided and cold, poked its rim above the crest of that [illegible]l, u[illegible]athomed world. Keno left the [illegible]ch a[illegible] unseen forking and embarked pon ano[illegible] following a dim trail that looped to rig[illegible] and left, twisting and turning and ever rising toward the chilly spine of the range. Now and then an owl hooted; coyotes howled their mournful litany to the Mexican moon; four-legged prowlers slunk away in the night as he approached.

Keno, giving his cayuse free head, whistled softly beneath his breath. Softly, and in fragments, letting the melody lift and fall. And his orange-flecked eyes like a cat's in the dark.

IN the tap-room of the Tavern of the Cottonwoods, Lupe Padillo was in the way of being a hero.

He had ridden boldly up the trail, through the village and into the patio, leading the pony that Keno used that afternoon, and wearing Keno's leather coat and Stetson hat. Keno's cartridge belt, and a heavy .45 swung from the mestizo's waist.

Lupe glibly explained to the questioning Blackie Gault and Rio Red that he had killed that evening, a gringo, who tried to hold him up and steal his clothes as a disguise. His tale was plausible; entirely so. He was acclaimed and showered with drinks; given a piping hot supper by a gloaty eyed padrone who wore a dirty bandage around his head.

"Well, that's that," Rio Red had rumbled, pawing his splay beard in satisfaction. He gave orders to signal the watchers on the out trails that everything was okay. A conch horn began blowing in short, then long, blasts. He slapped Padillo on the back, sent him a bottle of Jose Querva, wet his lips in relief and anticipation.

No one would interfere between him and his prisoner now, he reflected. He would return the girl for a high ransom—after he had finished with her. And Rio Red hated, as well as feared, the cold-eyed, thin-faced ex-buscadero who had dropped in on his hangout that day. He knew Keno, and also he knew his capabilities. And he didn't feel that Curry came to the posada for any good.

It didn't occur to him, at the moment, that Keno would not likely fall victim to a highjacking stunt like that. The half-breed's tale had been so real, with the evidence of horse and coat and gun belt to back it, that no question entered Hollister's mind as to its veracity.

WHILE still some distance from the village, Keno heard the cow horns wailing. Motionless, reined up in the shelter of the scrub, he listened long and carefully. Presently he made out faint signals ahead and to each side of him—the watchers were being called in. With a tight, hard grin he touched his pinto with his Mex spurs and rode on at a walk, his mount's hoofs making no noise in the booming wind.

It looked like Lupe's yarn had held water up at the inn. And if that was the case, Keno stood a good chance of gaining the cactus fence behind the inn undetected, even though he would be expected to try to enter the place by stealth. If the breed had sold Rio Red on his story, and gotten a word in the ear of the girl Rosa. . . .

A big *if*. . . . On the other side of the balance it meant that Keno had about one chance in a thousand of coming out alive.

He gained the rear of the cactus fence behind the posada without discovery, thanks to the sure-footedness of his Mex mountain pony and his own catlike caution. Tethering the horse in the shelter of a bouldery canyon, Keno squirmed through the spiky cholla and Spanish dagger and slid across the narrow trail, a gliding shadow in the blackness. The light from the moon was negligible.

The slit-like postern in the patio wall was ajar, as it had been that afternoon. But a few moments before it had been locked. Keno soon discovered the reason for its being open—a dark and silent figure huddled in a corner, a coat blanket thrown carelessly over it. Keno stirred it gently with his toe, his six-shooter held ready to strike.

No use. Lupe Padillo had silenced his prey most effectively with his knife. The

gate guard wouldn't cause trouble to anybody any more.

For a long moment Keno stood motionless in the shadow, frozen as a horned toad under a bush. Several horses stamped restlessly in the patio at the hitch racks; the sounds of revelry and wassail came from the tap-room, interposed with the dim strains of Mexican music—guitar, mandolin, accordion. Shadowy figures crossed the court, their cigarette tips glowing, talking to one another in low voices. Doors opened, quickly closed. The scent of spicy, peppery cooking tainted the night.

On the balcony above, behind the supporting cedar beams, dim lights glowed beneath three doors.

KENO jerked down his big sombreo—the one that Lupe Padillo had worn that morning—drew his serape closer about him, edged along the adobe wall toward the flagstones running along the east edge of the tavern. The low whisper of the girl, Rosa, halted him. She stood deep in the inky shadow of a recessed doorway, her form scarcely lighter than the night.

"Your friend is in the barroom, señor," she said, her lips barely forming the words. "They are giving him food and drink for slaying you tonight. I think they believe him. He makes out that he is drunk. A while ago he came into the patio on some excuse, and killed Paca, who guarded the back gate."

"Good boy." Keno stepped closer. "And you? Is the American señorita all right?"

"Now, yes. Later, no. The Red One means to take her tonight. She is locked in that room—up yonder—with the old crone Carlotta. I managed to get word to her of your coming, but the witch told El Rojo that I spoke to the girl in gringo tongue, and he threatened me because I laughed and wouldn't tell what I said. I hope you kill him, Americano."

"Do my damnedest," grunted Keno. "Reckon you can dope up a drink for the guards at the front gate, or shall I lay 'em out before I smoke up the barroom? Which shall it be? You call it."

Rosa gasped. "You intend to enter that place, señor?" she asked. "It will be suicide! Twenty men are in there, and every one is a devil. El Rojo, Negrito, Pancho Lucero—all. They will slay you swiftly."

"Mebbe. Your uncle, Gotcheye and Hype didn't kill me, did they?"

"*Por Dios,* no!" She laughed softly. "Hype and Skin[illegible] the one you call Gotcheye—are upstairs in bed with very bad headaches. I think their thick skulls are broken, so Negrito—Blackie—says. My oncle Gordito had his head tied up with cloths—it is most painful."

She reached out and patted K[illegible]'s cheek. "You are a devil, America[illegible]," she said. "And I will do as you say. Two little drops of something I have in my room, placed in tequila, will put them sleepy in five, six minutes. That I will do, and see that the gate is open. But the Red One and Negrito you must kill, for if they knew I did thees thing they would stake me on the ant-hill."

"They won't," assured Keno. "We'll take care of those half-cooked punks—me'n Lupe. Lupe is dependable."

"That I know, señor. God bless you, the both of you."

"Thanks, Rosa. You're a good girl, and I like yuh. I won't forget, *Adios.*"

"Not *adios,* Americano," whispered the girl. "*Adiosita.* Good-bye for a little."

And with that cryptic farewell she vanished into the doorway like a ghost. Keno grinned, hitched his gun belt into position, and walked on the balls of his feet toward the glob of yellow light marking the patio entrance to the cantina.

RIO RED HOLLISTER was getting rather drunk. Blackie Gault, his segundo, matching drink for drink with the Chief, gave no sign of intoxication. But both of them, believing Lupe Padillo's tale, were lulled into a false sense of security. Didn't the greaser have on Keno's hat and coat, gun belt and six-shooter? And he had ridden Curry's pony in.

Rio Red downed another slug of aguardiente. Keno had him worried a little that afternoon, he would admit. For he knew Keno of old—knew that he moved with a panther-like swiftness that had made him a terror to law officers and border brotherhood alike; knew his uncanny wizardry with pistols. But now he, Rio Red, could drink and make merry, for he had executed a neat coup across the river, and by a stroke of rare luck, disposed of a dangerous hombre soon afterward.

"Fill 'em up, Gordito," he shouted. "And give our knife-flinging friend yonder all he craves—it's on the house. He's from Chihuahua City, and has proved tonight he's a smarter *malo hombre* than Keno. All you buskys tilt a glass to him—he's one of us."

Lupe Padillo, swaying a bit on his feet, swilled mescal as he raised his tumbler. The purple-faced Lucero scowled, but downed his drink. He was Rio Red's ace gunman, and didn't like to take a back seat. Blackie Gault grinned crookedly as his eyes rested on the breed. Twenty odd men in the cantina in various stages of intoxication, seated at tables, lined up against the bar with glasses in their hands. Clamor, hoarse voices, coarse laughter, clink of bottles and glasses. A gang ripe for any mischief, thought the segundo. No softies there.

"To the hellions of Rio Red!" bawled Hollister, slopping liquor in a glass. "The hardest, orneriest, toughest gang of buskys south of the Yella River—"

"That's plumb ample," broke in a soft, chilly voice. "I doubt that any half-baked punks are that salty. Hold everything, you he-goats!"

Keno Curry, moving with the lightning speed of a jaguar, had opened the door, and stood in the patio entrance. And six-shooters were in both hands. Even as he spoke he slapped the door shut with his heel, and his twin pistols weaved over the slack jawed, astounded assemblage like singing rattlesnake's heads.

For as long as one could count five, the tableau held. Strained nasal breathing, and the crackle of piñon and 'squite logs in the 'dobe fireplace were the only sounds. The three musicians were frozen, petrified; the other bandits in the cantina likewise. This gringo devil covered them like a blanket with his guns—he stood, back to the door, commanding the only other exit from the room, the one behind the bar that led upstairs.

But where had he come from? Hadn't this greaser knifed him out on the trail that late afternoon? Worn his clothes in? Utter silence gripped the room, a tense, electric-charged quiet, as Keno covered the place with his slow, gray stare, his eyes glinting like specks of polished steel.

Rio Red's face was a muddy yellow, his eyes were staring. His hairy hands worked convulsively and a muscle in his face twitched. Slowly his gaze shifted from Keno to Lupe Padillo who, his back against the wall, stood regarding the buscaderos, a thin smile upon his lips and his Indian eyes jet-black in his mahogany face. He didn't appear to be drunk; not now, as his fingers hovered above his belt.

"You—you!" burst out Hollister, his face contorted. "You lyin' . . ."

It was Lucero who moved, not Lupe Padillo, whose face had gone dark at the words. Pancho Lucero, the killer of Rio Red's pack. With a bellow he went for his low-slung, thonged pistols, lunging forward toward Padillo, the purple birthmark on his cheek almost black with rage, his teeth bared in a snarl.

What happened could be placed within the slow count of three.

Padillo had been standing at a slight angle to the halfbreed. His hand, hanging at his thigh, made some sort of hidden, flashing motion that brought into his finger grip a stag handled, long bladed knife. He held it blade downward, his hand slightly back—in position for the deadly straightforward flip of the Yaqui knife-thrower.

And even as Lucero's hands stabbed for his guns, Lupe's steel zipped forward, swift as light itself. The ten-inch blade caught Lucero flush in the throat, imbedding itself so that only the handle was visible.

Someone cried out chokedly. The birthmarked breed halted, swayed, cursed once, horribly, through blood flecked lips. The pistols dropped from his nerveless fingers as he clawed at his throat, trying to jerk out that strangling blade. Scarlet stained his neck and shirt—he went crashing to the floor, flat on his face.

Once, twice his toes drummed futilely, then he went limp.

LUPE PADILLO moved like a cougar on the heels of his throw. In two leaps he was beside the dead gunman, pistol in hand; the next second he jerked the blade free and crouched beside Lucero, his eyes like coals of fire. A Mexican who wore a faded bandana about his long greasy hair ripped out his own knife and flung it at Padillo—flung it a split second after Keno Curry's first bullet knocked his feet from beneath him.

On one knee he cursed up at Keno, his

eyes drained with anguish. With both hands he clung to his stomach, and blood ran from a hole in his midriff. Then he began groaning and mouthing and screaming.

"If any more of yuh want a little daylight savvied into you, just make one single, funny move," said Curry with icy deliberateness. "Up with yore mitts, the whole caboodle of yuh. And any slow hombres is due to git gut-shot. Score 'em in the belly if they try any monkey business, Lupe."

"Si, señor," purred the mestizo. "One often lives three days with the lead in his intestines, and then dies most slowly and painfully."

Like a cat he backed to the wall, knife in one hand, pistol in the other, equally expert in the use of each. *"Si,"* he repeated. "I shall aim for the belly next time, *amigos.*"

A trickle of sweat ran down Rio Red's nose, dropped on the table.

"What do you want down here, Curry?" he asked. "What have I ever done to you? I'm not looking for trouble with you."

"No?" said Keno, a wolfish grin on his lips. "How's Gotcheye and Hype tonight? And poisoned likker, Red? Smart, aintcha."

Rio Red wet his lips, his puma yellow eyes desperate. Lucero lay dead on the floor—Bigote, his knife artist, was dying with a lead slug in his belly. And this devil, Padillo, now had both his own and the luckless Bigote's blades. Lord, but he had been a fool! He'd been taken in like a shorthorn by a glib-tongued Spig, and now. . . .

"I've come after the girl, Hollister." Keno's words cut through the sultry air like the slash of a knife, his eyes, merciless and implacable, stabbed the splay-bearded outlaw's. "She leaves here with me, savvy? You gonna turn her loose peaceable, or do I take her? I'm not askin' but once, fella."

And when Rio Red hesitated, Keno added: "Refuse, and you go places on a shutter, he-goat. You and Gault and seven, eight more. We've got you both by the ying-yang, and you'll be the first pair to hit the dirt."

"You—you—!" mouthed Red, and his eyes were the color of his beard. "What's she to you, hombre? What right you got to muscle in on my deal this-a-way? Sore because I beat [illegible]u to it, are you? Why, you . . ."

"Better [illegible]w."

Those were Keno's only words, but they stopped Hollister's mouth like a gag. He coughed raspingly, kept both hands even with his face. His mottled [illegible]age [illegible] alkali white. "Hold it, Keno! [illegible] mumble "I'll . . ."

Keno had seen Blackie Gault setting himself, noted the fixed stare come into the busky's black eyes. And he was far too old a hand not to savvy that killer signal in the bleak-faced renegade. The homicidal mania that shone like a yellow flame in the man's red-lidded eyes would set off the powder keg in the Tavern of the Cottonwoods. And even as Keno watched Gault from the corners of his eyes, the sides of Blackie's nose pinched in and he streaked for his gun, flinging himself sidewise at the same time.

Keno Curry shot from his breed pivot holster, the gun smashing thunderously in the room. Blackie Gault's guns went off twice—one bullet hitting the wall to the left of Keno, the other burying itself in the floor. Blackie tripped forward and crashed full length, dead before he hit the floor.

His hat rolled off as his head hit the hard timber. He never moved. Both arms lay ahead of him and in one fist a revolver was limply gripped, a thin film of smoke twining from the muzzle, swaying, ceilingward through the dense atmosphere.

Crouched like a puma, lips peeled back from his teeth, Keno had both guns out now. He didn't hesitate. The pupils in his eyes were contracted to needle points, barely showing through slitted lids. His guns came up.

"Roll the dice, Lupe," he said with swift savagery. "Cut yore wolf loose."

The smash of his .45 drowned out his last word—its slug struck Rio Red square in the chest. The outlaw staggered backward like a stricken mountain lion, knocking his chair and a table over, swept off his feet by the bullet's impact. His arms and legs were in a peculiar position of disorder, but his body, instead of halting its backward plunge, went over twice in an

awkward flip-flop, to land heavily on the floor.

Then hell broke loose in the Tavern of the Cottonwoods

GORDITO, the barkeep, [illegible]ding half crouched with one hand below the level of the bar, his eyes staring like a hypnotized person at Keno, came to sud- [illegible] life [illegible] a heavy bullet smashed his [illegible]arthy, [illegible]marked face—breaking the cl[illegible]ek-bone an[illegible]scoring both cheeks. With a scream he flopped to the floor, blinded and maimed, by Padillo's bullet. It was just as well, for a sawed-off shotgun was reposing beneath the bar.

The crash of heavy guns blended together, a diapason of savagery. Men cursed and threw themselves aside; the place was a bedlam of cries and oaths. Chaos reigned in the bat of an eye. Chairs and tables were overturned and rolling. Men barged into one another getting out of each other's way. The heavy crashes of spitting guns blazed through the fog of acrid, ugly smoke—men screamed and groaned and yelped.

"Kill them! Death to the Texans!"

At the first shot Keno sprang to the side of the wall—as Lupe's bullet downed Gordito he snaked to the bar-end. Bullets whistled by him as he crouched there, fanning the room with lead, knocking over a busky with each shot. Lupe Padillo, flat on his stomach near the door with revolver blazing, was also taking grim toll. The confusion invoked by the surprise of the attack, and the number of men in the room, aided the Texans no little.

But Keno wasn't fool enough to suppose such things could last long. Although a dozen men were down, he had a nasty flesh wound on his left forearm which was bleeding badly, and another bullet had cut through the right side of his shirt, barely raking skin. Padillo appeared to be unhit.

"That's givin' 'em hell and repeat, fella," yelled Keno. "Follow me."

One of the kerosene lights had been shattered by gunfire—Keno's bullet sent the other crashing to the floor in a muddle of flame and glass, leaving the cantina in utter darkness save for blue flickerings. He and Lupe arrived at the patio door simultaneously. . . .

Someone outside had locked it!

V

WITH the snarl of an animal at bay Keno whirled, ran at a zigzag crouch along the wall to the end of the bar, by chance stumbled flush against the rear door, leading from behind the counter. It opened to his jerk. With Padillo hard on his heels he leapt through and slammed it tight behind him, fetching up against a flight of stone stairs.

The breed's swift hands located a thick bar. This he quickly dropped across the oak portal, effectively closing it to the frenzied mob in the cantina. Breathing heavily, the two ran up the dark stair well, reloading their guns as they did so.

A sharp imperative hiss halted them near the top. It was Rosa Torres.

"Quick! This way, señores! We must hurry swiftly."

Like a gray ghost she stepped from a niche in the masonry and sped ahead of them out on the balcony, which ran around three sides of the patio. Dark it was up there, with no lights showing, and the trio covered the space between the rough cedar beams and the face of the 'dobe walls at rapid gait. The tumult in the barroom sounded faint and subdued. Evidently whoever had secured the thick, outer door had not yet opened it to the shouting, cursing men imprisoned within. And in the patio men were calling to each other.

"I saw them fasten the door from outside with a big log beneath the catch," said Rosa rapidly in Spanish, "but I could not prevent it. Yet I did prevent the one called Tonto from barring the door to the stairs . . . I was watching, and saw him as he ran across the balcony. I—I had to strike twice with my blade, señores."

"Good girl," applauded Keno lightly. "I'm afraid your uncle got hurt tonight, pretty bad, señorita. Just in case, we're sorry."

"Caramba! That reptile!" Rosa Torres spat like a catamount. "I hoped you had killed him, along with El Rojo and Negrito. . . ."

"He is as good as dead," said Lupe Padillo with a grim chuckle. "If he does live, it will be many days before he eats things more solid than weak soup."

"These men at the front gate," said the girl hurriedly, "I have feex them weeth

the little button in the glass of mescal. Also I have unlock the gate for us, and throw away the beeg key after they sleep. But we mus' hurry, my friends. The señorita is in the third room from the end of the balcony wall—there is no light, but she is lock in there with old Carlotta."

"We'll get her," said Keno. "What the devil . . .!"

THE cantina door opened, spewing out a horde of rushing, shouting figures. They scattered across the patio like a covey of Mexican quail, indistinct shadows beneath the limbs of the huge cottonwood tree. But above their voices sounded a hoarse, bull-like bellow, directing them to seek out Keno and Lupe Padillo.

"Five hundred pesos, gold, to the one who brings the gringo down!"

And the howl of his wolf pack answered as renegade white and breed, Mexican and Yaqui, put their noses to the scent.

"I'm crazy," Keno swore softly. "I'd a bet my bottom dollar that Red stopped that slug flush in the chest—I saw him loop backward. That's funny."

"No, no!" gasped Rosa. "It will be no use to shoot at his body above the waist. He wears the steel corselet—one that will stop the pistol shot."

"Well," gritted Keno, "next time I'll raise my aim a little. The son of a goat!—he's gonna beat us to the girl's room shore."

Outlaws were rushing up the balcony stairs now from the patio. Keno and Lupe dodged behind two cedar posts on the outer edge of the gallery, and as footsteps began pounding along the rough boards, they cut loose with their pistols. Red stabs of flame and zipping slugs answered them; a scream and a choked oath mingled with the shots. Steel clanged with a sharp sound against stone.

A man's body thumped heavily on the gallery, a second crashed against the railing, teetered a moment, then dove to the hard ground beneath. Feet scuffled as the renegades hastily backed up and sought cover.

Keno slid forward like an ocelot, both guns in his hands, his lips drawn back tightly against his locked teeth. A door almost against him flung open, and a barging body crashed into him. Their guns went off almost together.

The heat of the flame seared Keno's ribs and his shirt caught fire. The other man, a bullet through his lungs, choked and fell heavily into him. Keno hurled him savagely aside. Quickly he smothered the flames, leapt ahead, firing into the milling men near the stair head. They scattered swiftly.

"Señor—where?"

"Here, friend. Get 'em, Lupe!"

For answer, the breed's gun flashed up and down and landed with a sickening thud upon the head of a staggering man, who, badly hit, ran blindly into him. Blood spattered and flew.

The door of the room, where the American girl was held captive, opened swiftly, and the big, red-bearded outlaw squirmed through like an eel, slamming it behind him. Keno's bullet splintered the lintel half an inch behind his head. The ex-buscadero raced forward, cursing. Lupe Padillo, springing along the line of cedar posts, drove the outlaws away from the stair landing with a fusillade of shots. Rosa Torres, scarf wrapped tightly about her head and shoulders, was invisible in the shadow of a recessed doorway.

Rio Red's laugh rang out from the room as Keno halted beside the door.

"I got yuh, Keno. Try gettin' in here and I'll gun the girl sure as Christmas. Better slope off, busky."

"If you lay even a little finger on her, Hollister," said Keno in an even, terrible voice, "you'll die in a way that'll even make one of your Yaqui torturers sick."

His gun roared, and a bullet thudded into the thick planking, smashing the lock. He flung himself against it—it gave way. On the heels of his shot he plunged in, crouching, both guns up.

A GUTTERING stub of candle burned on a table in one corner. A bed stood against the far wall. Two slit-like, grilled windows, a water *olla,* a bearskin on the floor, completed the furnishings. In the dim light, Keno saw the girl in Rio Red's arms, fighting vainly to release herself, her shirtwaist torn almost off. Beyond them crouched an old woman: an evil-visaged, hook-nosed hag, her seamed face a mask of terror.

As Keno plunged through the doorway, the girl's eyes met Keno's, and they were sick with terror. Rio Red, with a foul curse, held her before him and fired point blank at Keno. The Texan ducked and weaved —the bullet barely grazed his right ear. Before Hollister could thumb his six-shooter again, Keno's weapon spat flame.

Rio Red's pistol clattered to the floor from a shattered hand. Keno's bullet struck the knuckles, shearing off and mangling three fingers, drawing a howl of pain from the bandit. He hurled Beverly Meagher to one side with such force that she smashed against the wall and sank to her knees. Keno deliberately brought up his smoking pistol.

"Now, dog, you or me goes under. And it won't be me."

"Don't shoot, Keno!" whined Hollister, pawing at his shattered hand. "Don't kill me without a chance, busky—"

"You white livered *cabrone!* Scared now, huh? G'wan and claw that other rod of yores, yella belly."

But Rio Red Hollister, river renegade and Chihuahua *malo hombre,* kept his arms up and pleaded for his life. Outside the door, Lupe Padillo still sniped at the men below in the patio, while their return fire slapped bullets against the thick adobe walls of the balcony. Rosa Torres slid into the room like a wraith, took in the scene with one comprehensive glance, and lifted Beverly Meagher to her feet. The American girl looked at her with wide, terrified eyes.

A bullet splintered through the door stop, glanced across the room and flattened against the far wall, barely missing the cowering, red-bearded coward. Keno grinned—a fixed grin that didn't include his eyes. His left arm, the right side of his face, was bloody. He wasn't a pretty sight as he nervously thumbed his gun hammers. A plan was forming in his agile brain and his narrowed eyelids flickered as he regarded Hollister.

Lupe Padillo, taut and swift-eyed, crouched in the shadows of the balcony beyond the door. Now and then he glanced into the room through the portal slit.

Keno surveyed the white-faced girl a second. He knew a pretty girl when he saw one, and this one took the bun for good looks, despite her haggard face and frightened eyes. Beverly Meagher, in turn, regarded Keno almost dazedly. There was something about this thin-faced, thin-lipped, cold-eyed man that captured her faith and friendship, spilled a surge of confidence into her veins. She noted but vaguely that he was bleeding in two places.

Keno turned back to Rio Red Hollister, who was moaning and clamping tight his mangled paw.

"I'll make a trade with you, hombre," he said flatly. "This. Order those coyotes of yours down below into the barroom, and make 'em leave the horses' hitches alone. Clear the court pronto. Then you'll goose step ahead of us down-stairs and stroll far as the back gate with us—just in case. You'll lock and bar it, then toss the key over the wall to me. Just that, Red.

"In return I'll give you your life, yella man. If—and get this, busky—*if* none of yore polecats starts anything. The first crack they, you, or anybody makes is goin' to write finish for you in great big letters all over the front page. I know all about that breastplate of hammered mail yuh got on, and I won't make the same mistake twice, Red. That's the last chance, hombre. Take it or leave it. Whaddaya say?"

"And s'pose I don't?" whined Hollister. "You'll shoot me in cold blood, will you?"

"Nothin' that easy," said Keno grimly. "Not by a damsite. I'll have my friend, Lupe the Knife, carve you up in steaks and spare ribs and toss the hunks down to your coyotes below. And you'll last a long time, yella boy.

"Course they'll likely rub us out in the long run, if you refuse, but that won't help you none. Not any. For you'll be kickin' out slowly and mighty painfully."

Rio Red shuddered; shook his head like a baited bull. His face was the color of dirty alkali from the pain of his wound.

"You win, busky," he said thickly. "You win, so far. I'll tell 'em."

"Remember," warned Keno as he followed Hollister to the door, "don't try any tricks. The first funny move from anybody is gonna be yore last."

RIO RED began hollering as soon as he set foot outside the lintel. He walked to the balcony rail, and Lupe Padillo crouched just behind him, the needle-point of his knife pricking the outlaw's

backbone. In the room, Rosa Torres had cowed the old Yaqui crone with her knife and was wrapping Beverly Meagher's coat about her shoulders. Keno hunkered by the doorway, out of sight, his guns ready.

Curses and objections volleyed up in response to Hollister's plea for the men to gather in the taproom, but he snarled that he was a prisoner with his life at stake. The shooting had ceased, and after a minute the outlaws began sullenly to move across the patio. Someone lit a candle in the taproom. Presently the door closed.

"Better make sure that everybody's holed up, Red," reminded Keno bleakly. "Let yore conscience be yore guide, fella."

But no more replies came to the bearded outlaw's shouts, and finally he turned around and looked at Keno. "Guess that's all," he said nervously. "C'mon. I'll be glad to see the last of yuh."

"Take it slow," said Curry, motioning him ahead, and deftly knotting a leather pigging string about Red's left wrist. The free end he held in his own left hand. "And yuh better step easy and careful, friend."

Lupe Padillo brought up the rear, covering the two girls between him and Keno. Rosa half supported the American captive, whose knees seemed mighty weak. But she kept murmuring that soon she would be all right. The steps were negotiated without mishap, and Keno struck directly toward the corrals and hitch-racks in the rear of the patio. The huge cottonwood murmured in the wind, and its shadow lay inky black over most of the flagged court.

Keno's eyes raked the blackness as he hazed Hollister up to the tethered horses. His gun muzzle touched the back of the outlaw's neck. Both of Padillo's horses were where he had tied them, and three more ponies stood saddled and tethered not far away. Evidently they belonged to some of the gang's lookout men who had recently arrived at the inn.

"Señor," whispered Padillo at Keno's ear. "The girl, Rosa, goes with me. It is her wish. She does not belong in this roost."

"Fair enuf," grunted Keno. "She'll likely knife you some night, though. Listen. Get those girls on their horses, out of the back gate, then ride through the break in the cactus fence and head into that little gulch just beyond. That's the trail I came in on. And my pony's out there—if somebody ain't moved him."

Rio Red's [illegible]na-yellow eyes were roving the s[illegible]owy blackness. The blood-orange moon sent wan beams of light stabbing into the patio, and the wind howled like a tortured devil around the 'dobe tavern, but the swaying of the cottonwood's uppermost branches was th[illegible] only move[illegible]ment in the court. A door [illegible]mmed on t[illegible]e balcony above.

"Get goin'," Keno's voice cracked to Lupe. "And you, Rio Red, uncross your fingers and gimme the key to that back gate."

"I ain't got it," protested Hollister. "Honest, Keno, I ain't!"

Keno swung open the closed portal—Lupe Padillo motioned Rosa Torres and Beverly Meagher through. The Mexican girl knew the road, and led out. Rio Red glanced up—Lupe Padillo dipped forward in his saddle like a striking rattler. The buckskin horse he rode plunged wildly.

A zipping, clanging object struck the ground just behind the horse—a steel blade which struck the pony on the left hip and sliced off a two-inch chunk of skin as clean as though done with a razor. It had barely missed the vaquero, passing aslant his shoulder and over his back. If he hadn't dodged forward so quickly it would have buried itself between his shoulder blades.

"Chingado!" Padillo snarled as he touched his pony with the hooks and plunged through the gateway. At the same instant Rio Red leaped aside with a hoarse yell, and the report of a heavy pistol rocked the silence. It also was fired from the balcony, and its bullet cut through Keno's serape on the left side before thudding into the 'dobe wall. Its thud was scarcely finished before Keno's gun spat red.

It was a snap shot at the gun flash, but must have been close, for heavy footsteps pounded on the balcony. And when Keno fired, Rio Red came to life. He jerked his left hand free of the pigging string in Keno's fingers, and down his arm streaked the spring-gun hidden up his sleeve. Keno, his back flattened hard against the 'dobe wall, flicked his six-shooter sidewise.

"Last throw of the dice, yella man," he gritted.

VI

THE .45 roared, and Ri[illegible]d Hollister banged heavily into the wall, brought up short as if a rope was thrown and swiftly tightened about his neck. He poised grotesquely a moment, blood smearing down his f[illegible]e, the stub-nosed automatic dropping fro[illegible] his fingers. Then he went down heavily on his face and lay still, his gaudy sombrero spinning away crazily. Keno's bullet had drilled him flush through the forehead.

The Texan leapt backward, slammed the door shut, and ran like a timber wolf out and across the narrow roadway down to the break in the cactus fence. When he entered, earlier that night, he had carved himself a gap in the spiky barrier—now Lupe Padillo and the two girls were safe beyond its hedge, waiting. Keno snaked through like a diamond-back, then shoved the sliced-off barrel cactus back into the gap. Holding to Lupe's stirrup, he ran toward the brush-choked gulch where he had tied his pony.

The Tavern of the Cottonwoods were buzzing like a prodded hornet's nest. A fusillade of shots sounded; loud yells and shouts. The back door flew open, disgorging running men. Lupe Padillo had thoughtfully cut the cinches on all the saddled horses, as well as bridle straps—that would delay pursuit a little. Panting, stumbling over sharp stones and clumps of prickly pear, Keno reached his hidden mount.

Rapidly the quartet struck off up the zigzag goat-track among the juniper, pine and granite. It would be tough sledding from now on. The wind tore at them with vicious, icy fingers—thorny—and spiky bushes raked skin and clothing impartially. Keno's arm was beginning to pain him considerably, and he had lost quite a bit of blood. But he gritted his teeth and bore on, fighting off the weakness. No time to stop and tie himself up now.

An hour's stiff going brought them to the kidney-shaped burn where Keno and Lupe had cached their blanket rolls. Keno took time out to bind up his arm, which was fast getting numb, although the wound wasn't serious. His sleeve was blood-soaked, and his left hand stained to the finger-tips, but the bullet had missed the bone, tearing through the fleshy part in a clean wound.

Stiff slugs of tequila, from a bottle Keno had in his roll, put new life into the half-frozen quartet. They started on again, pushing through the wind and tortured terrain of the Ghost, Lupe Padillo leading.

The quartet rode in silence, save for now and then a low word to one another. Padillo had his high power rifle, Keno only his six-shooters. Rosa Torres had a knife, Beverly Meagher no weapon of any sort. Once the Texas girl asked Keno for another drink of tequila.

"I'm absolutely in cold storage," she chattered. "But don't bother about me—I'll be okay. When we get some place where we can talk, there's a million questions I'm dying to ask."

"They'll keep," replied Keno. "We ain't out of the woods yet, sister—not by a damsite."

"Don't I know it! But tell me this, Keno. What happened to that red bearded devil and his vulture faced pal?"

"They're gittin' acquainted with some new faces far, far away," said Keno grimly. "The house committee back at Tres Marias is gonna have a new selection of officers pretty quick."

Beverly Meagher shuddered. "I'll never forget this thing," she said slowly. "Or you, Señor Keno."

"Shucks," grunted Keno. "You'll get me all blushin' directly, lady."

LUPE PADILLO, who was riding in front with the Mexican girl, halted suddenly and bent his head, listening. Keno, whose own ears were sharp as a wolverine's could hear nothing but the roar of the wind whipping down the cliffs and howling across the ridges, but the mestizo turned in his saddle and spoke swiftly in Border lingo.

"They are cutting in on the left of us," he said to Keno. "There is a trail over there perhaps. We must ride faster or we will be trapped. If they get ahead of us. . . ."

Lupe didn't finish the sentence, but his shrug was quite eloquent enough.

"All right," said Keno briefly. "We

better give our cayuses the hooks then. Might as well break our necks on this trail as get drygulched. *Andiamo.*"

They plunged ahead at a fast trot, then gallop, letting the sure-footed ponies have the reins. Catclaw and whitebush raked at them; the horses slithered and stumbled over rocks and loose shale; a hundred varieties of spiny and spiky cacti slapped them with needle-like pricks. The moon, from blood-red, paled to dull silver in mid-sky, and as it swung low toward the west its beams seemed to cast a peculiar chill upon the already arctic earth.

Ahead, the trail entered a wide drywash into which opened three canyons like the spokes of a wheel. It led straight across the brushy, bouldery floor to a coulee directly opposite, snaked up a hogback, then crooked over and down the painted butte to Gorro Sanchez' ranch. It was an ideal spot for an ambush.

"Any way to get around it, Lupe?" queried Keno, his eyes fixed on the obscurity ahead.

"Not that I know of," shrugged the breed. "Mebbeso, in the dark. . . ."

"I know," said Keno. "Don't look so *bueno,* but I guess there's no other way. Well, count your beads, girls. Let's antelope."

He touched spurs to his pony, the others fell in with him. Stones rolled and clattered as the mounts trotted down into the wash. With pistols at the ready, Keno and Padillo rode the flanks, tense and keen eyed. Far behind they could hear the first approaching signs of pursuit.

A rifle cracked to the right. And on its echo a regular fusillade of gun and pistol fire broke out from both sides of the wash. Bullets zipped about the quartet like hornets.

Lupe Padillo smothered a cry and ended it in a hot oath. Keno's pony reared wildly, spun like a top and crashed down. He flung himself clear just in time, rolled over and landed on his feet. Beverly Meagher's plunging horse crashed into him. Keno made a wild grab and seized the bridle.

"Into that coulee!" he gritted. "Over on the left, quick!"

Still holding the bridle bit, he swung the frightened buckskin and hazed it across the scrubby swale into a dark *boca* opposite, plunging into a mass of boulders and pear. Granite chipped near him—a bullet ripped a hole through the crown of his steeple-peaked sombrero—but he made the shelter of the gulch untouched by the furious onslaught of lead.

ALL at once a body of horsemen rode plunging into the wash, firing as they came, setting the foggy shadows a-tremble with a wicked, slashing fusillade that beat in echoes against the low ceiling of the dawn. The lead slugs whined and zipped and ricocheted on the canyon walls; other bullets hailed down on them from above. Five horsemen made straight for the mouth of the canyon shooting as they came, bodies bent low over their saddles.

"Take 'em!" snarled Keno, and thumbed the hammers of both guns. Lupe Padillo's rifle roared at the same time, three shots almost in the space of one as he pulled trigger and worked lever. One horse, with its rider hanging by a foot caught in the stirrup, did reach the neck of the gulch before whirling wildly and dashing away, dragging the limp form of the man beside it.

The other four lay piled up in a dark blotch on the lightening floor of the scrubby wash. No movement came from there.

Beverly Meagher ejected a spent cartridge from Rio Red's automatic, drew a deep breath, and whispered, "Six! I must remember."

Keno, standing in the shelter of a split boulder from which a gnarled tree grew, didn't answer. He was taut and swift eyed, listening intently. Padillo, finger on trigger, crouched directly behind him. Something was happening down at Casa Scanchez and all around the wash. A regular battle!

Keno glanced above. Bushes crashed, shots spat, men yelled and cursed beyond the canyon rim. One rolled down the slope, caught up against a tree, hung there screaming. His rifle bounced on to the bottom of the canyon floor, struck a stone and went off, the bullet zipping harmlessly through the brush.

Down the swale sounded a high-pitched screech that never came from a Mex throat south of the Rio. Keno stepped into the clear, opened his mouth and let out a yell in kind, making the *boca* ring. This he

followed by three swift shots toward the south neck of the pass.

"Yeeee-Oooow!"

Again the wildcat yell, followed by hurtling hoofbeats—many of them. Shots and more yelps. The shooting became heavier toward the lower neck of the gut, increased to a regular drumfire. Somebody was catching hell and repeat down there.

"Keeeno!" hoo-hooed a voice. "Where the devil are you?"

"Here!" yelped the ex-buscadero. "Who in hell must I shoot at?"

"Hold everything," came the reply. "The Rurales, and a gang of my riders, are mopping up. We caught 'em by the short hairs this time."

A moment later Roy Yeager, with three of his vaqueros, charged up to the canyon mouth, rifles and pistols in hand.

"You're welcome as a drink of likker," Keno told the rancher. "But how come you're so far in *mañana* land?"

"Tipped the Rurales," grinned Yeager, twisting a quirly. "And they invited us along, seein' as we already were on the wrong side of the Rio. The captain is a good egg—c'mon we'll see him down at Sanchez' dump. He'll give yuh the fur-lined pipe for smokin' out Red and Blackie an' gettin' the girl back. Boy howdy, but uncle's been raisin' triple-distilled hell north of Candelaria. He put a prod on Mexico City, and they're sendin' planes and soldiers."

"Send 'em back," grunted Keno. "Let's get goin', *amigo*—and gimme a smoke. My left flipper's kinda out of whack."

A BIG blaze was roaring in the 'dobe fireplace in Gorro's hacienda. Beverly Meagher, her thin cheeks full of returning color now, warmed her hands and back at the cheery glow, and Rosa Torres sat with her feet and legs naked to the warmth. Trim uniformed Rurales, those crack police of Mexico, strolled here and there in the house and vicinity. In one corner of the low-ceilinged room, Keno and Lupe and Roy Yeager talked to Captain Montoya, the swarthy-faced, black mustached commander of the rangers.

In tight trousers and glove fitting coat, the captain was a striking figure.

"We caught them clean," he exulted. "Pinched them between our nippers. Unfortunately, one of the bandits escaped and gave an alarm by blowing upon a steer horn. Five or six of them, perhaps, managed to get away. But the rest—" he snapped his fingers—"are fineesh, like that."

"Well, it all came out in the wash," shrugged Keno. "Link Spillane will be here pretty quick in a plane to take the girls back to Texas. And I reckon Miss Meagher will be plumb glad to see the old Paso del Norte again."

"You said it," echoed the girl. "But you are returning with me, Señor Keno Curry. My dad must thank you fittingly and properly for this. And I don't take no, or any excuses, savvy?"

"Shucks, lady." Keno grinned engagingly. "I can't do that, just can't. You see. . . ."

A sharp volley from behind the house cut into his words. Keno looked at the captain, who shrugged and smiled thinly.

"The feeneesh of old Gorro and seven, eight prisoners," said Captain Montoya. "We take no prisoners from this nest of carrion, señor."

Keno grinned, turned back to the staring girl.

"As I was remarkin', lady, I just can't ride back to Texas with yuh and Rosa and Lupe, much as I'd like to. You see. . . ."

"Why can't you?" she demanded. "You've got to, Keno. And that's that."

"Nope," insisted Keno. "You see, me'n Roy here—" he motioned toward the grinning Yeager twin—"had started huntin' day before yesterday when you kinda busted into our arrangements. So we're gonna trail back easy to Sandelaria and bag a black-tail buck or so before finishin' our shootin' spree up at Cienaga in the Bend. Savvy?"

"But why," insisted the girl, "did you come down here in the first place?"

"Well," said Keno, "to tell yuh the truth, some jasper in that hold-up shot a hole through my hat."

"Well," said Beverly Meagher in a most unladylike manner, "I'll be hanged!"

And amid the general laughter that followed, the drone of Tex Tolliver's red plane could be heard riding the north wind from up Texas way.

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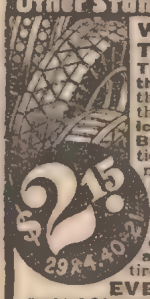

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29x4.75-20	2.50	1.25
29x5.00-19	2.85	1.25
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.25
5.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.55
33x6.00-21	3.65	1.55
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.75
6.00-16	3.75	1.45

REGULAR CORD TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3½	$2.35	$0.95
31x4	2.95	1.25
32x4	2.95	1.25
33x4	2.95	1.25
34x4	3.25	1.35
32x4½	3.35	1.45

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES
(High Pressure)

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	$4.25	$1.95
33x5	3.95	1.75
34x5	4.25	2.25
32-6	7.95	2.95
3620	9.95	4.45

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30-20	$3.75	$1.65
7.00-20	4.45	1.95
7.00-20	5.95	2.95
ALL OTHER SIZES		

Size	Tires	Tubes
33x4½	$3.45	$1.45
34x4½	3.48	1.45
30x5	3.65	1.65
33x5	3.75	1.75
35x5	3.95	1.75
38x7	10.95	4.65
31x7	$10.95	$4.65
36x8	11.45	4.95
40x8	13.25	4.95
30-29	$6.95	$3.75
35-20	8.95	4.95
9.00-20	10.95	5.65
9.75-20	13.95	6.45

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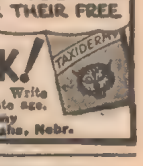

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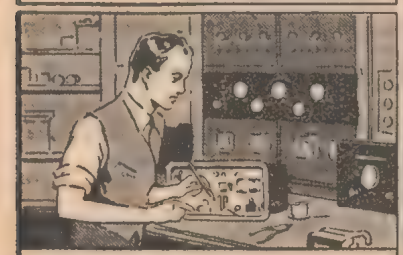
I jumped from $18 a week to $50
-- a Free Book started me toward this
GOOD PAY IN RADIO

HERE'S *How it Happened*

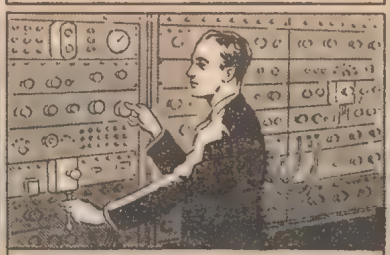
by S. J. E.
(NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)

"I had an $18 a week job in a shoe factory. I'd probably be at it today if I had not read about the opportunities in Radio and started training at home for them."

"The training National Radio Institute gave me was so practical I was soon ready to make $5, $10, $15 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."



"When I finished training I accepted a job as serviceman with a Radio store. In three weeks I was made service manager at more than twice what I earned in the shoe factory."



"Eight months later N.R.I. Employment Department sent me to Station KWCR as a Radio operator. Now I am Radio Engineer at Station WSUI. I am also connected with Television Station W9XK."

"N.R.I. Training took me out of a low-pay shoe factory job and put me into Radio at good pay. Radio is growing fast. The field is wide open to properly trained men."

J. E. SMITH,
President
National Radio
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Established 1914

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Many Make $30, $50, $75 a Week

Do you too want a better job? Do you too want to make more money? Radio offers many spare time and full time opportunities for good pay.

Get Ready Now for Jobs Like These

Broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many $200 to $500 a year—full time repair jobs pay many $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to $6,000 a year. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud speaker systems, offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio.

Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll I start sending Extra Money Job Sheets showing how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and ideas that made good spare time money—$200 to $500 a year—for hundreds. I send Special Radio Equipment to conduct experiments, build circuits, get practical experience. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE RADIO SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT TO HELP FIX SETS QUICKER—SAVE TIME, MAKE MORE MONEY.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities, also those coming in Television; tells about my Training in Radio and Television; shows 131 letters from men I trained, shows what they are doing, earning; shows my Money Back Agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on penny post card—NOW!

J. E. SMITH,
President,
Dept. 8KM
National Radio
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Washington,
D. C.

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out spare time and full time opportunities in Radio, and explains your practical method of training at home in spare time to become a Radio Expert. (Please write plainly.)

Name..... Age.....

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One Year From Today

What Will You Be Earning?

This may be the most important year in your life! Your whole future is apt to depend on how you take advantage of present business changes.

Returning prosperity is opening up new jobs, and creating unusual opportunities. But that does not insure prosperity for you. Only you can insure that.

For months—maybe years—employers will be able to pick and choose out of the millions now unemployed or dissatisfied with their work and pay. Naturally they will pick the men with most preparation and ability.

You should—you must—make yourself quickly more valuable—to protect what you have and to insure getting your share of the promotions and pay raises. It is being done by OTHERS—it can be done by YOU!

Ask us to send you full details about our new spare time training, and to explain how it prepares you to better meet today's demands and opportunities. If you really are in earnest, you should investigate *at once*. Check your field below, write your name and address, and *mail*.

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Send me, free, the facts about the demands and opportunities in the business field I have checked—about your training for that field.

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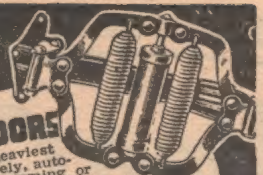

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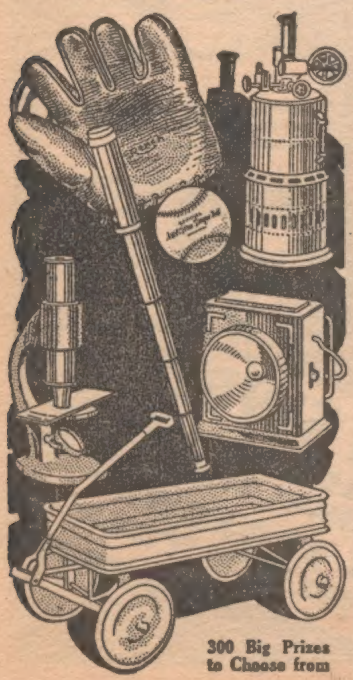

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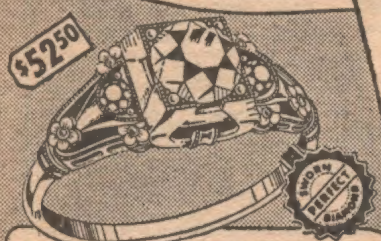

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A86–Bridal pair–engagement and wedding ring designed to match in 14K yellow gold. Each set with 5 brilliant diamonds.

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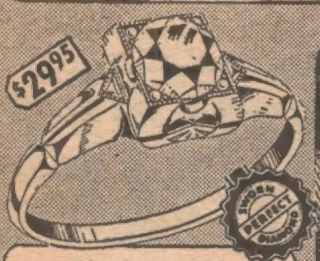

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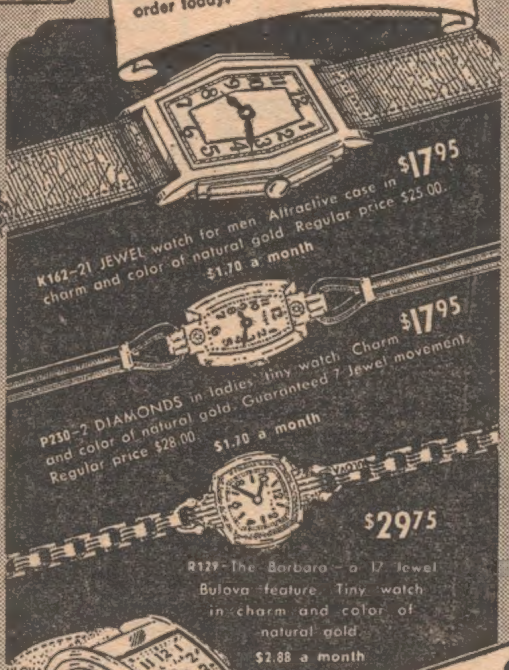
K162–21 JEWEL watch for men. Attractive case in charm and color of natural gold. Regular price $25.00.
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JUST LIKE DAD'S- IN FIT AND WEAR!
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